

# History of the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry in Southern Louisiana

## Volume II: Bayou Lafourche – Oral Histories of the Oil and Gas Industry



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Prepared under MMS Contract  
1435-01-02-CA-85169  
by  
Louisiana State University  
Center for Energy Studies  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803

Published by

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Minerals Management Service  
Gulf of Mexico OCS Region**

**New Orleans  
September 2008**

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Telephone Number: 1-800-200-GULF  
1-504-736-2519

## **CITATION**

Suggested citation:

McGuire, T. 2008. History of the offshore oil and gas industry in southern Louisiana. Volume II: Bayou Lafourche – Oral histories of the oil and gas industry. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, New Orleans, LA. OCS Study MMS 2008-043. 177 pp.

## **ABOUT THE COVER**

Offshore rig, vessels, and barge in the Gulf of Mexico, May 1956, Jesse Grice Collection (photo number 242-16), Morgan City Archives.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
PREFACE .....	vii
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1. A Note on Methods and Format .....	4
2. THE EARLY YEARS ALONG BAYOU LAFOURCHE .....	7
2.1. Chester Cheramie (March 4, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	8
2.2. Loulan Pitre (September 24, 2001; Cut Off, LA) .....	13
2.3. Steven Charpentier (September 12, 2002; Galliano, LA) .....	17
3. OIL AND OUTSIDERS COME TO GOLDEN MEADOW .....	21
3.1. Pershing and Ophelia Lefort (March 5, 2002; Larose, LA) .....	22
3.2. Pep and Bertha Williams (September 21, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	30
3.3. Dick Guidry (October 4, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	38
3.4. Mac Rome (September 22, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	42
4. THE INDUSTRY AND THE WORKFORCE GROW .....	45
4.1. Loulan Pitre (September 24, 2001; Cut Off, LA) .....	47
4.2. Martial Babin (July 18, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	52
4.3. Hurby Plaisance (July 23, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	59
4.4. Abraham Griffin (July 23, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	67
4.5. Dick Guidry (October 4, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	71
4.6. Mac Rome (September 22, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	75
5. BOAT COMPANIES ALONG THE BAYOU .....	83
5.1. Weber Callais (June 4, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	84
5.2. Chester Cheramie (March 4, 2002; Golden Meadow) .....	95
5.3. Roy Champagne (September 20, 2001; Golden Meadow) .....	99
5.4. Dick Guidry (October 4, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	103
6. A FISHING COMMUNITY .....	109
6.1. Wilbert Collins (July 18, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	110
6.2. Whitney Dardar (July 14, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	114
6.3. Steven Charpentier (July 12, 2002; Galliano, LA) .....	122
7. GETTING THROUGH THE EIGHTIES .....	129
7.1. Ronald Callais (June 6, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	130
7.2. Ted Falgout (March 14, 2002; Galliano, LA) .....	141
7.3. Butch Renois and Emmett H. D. Renois Jr. (July 17, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	147
7.4. Pershing and Ophelia Lefort (March 5, 2002; Larose, LA) .....	156
7.5. Mac Rome (September 22, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	157

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**  
**(continued)**

	<u>Page</u>
8. LEGACIES .....	159
8.1. Windell Curole (June 5, 2002; Galliano, LA) .....	159
8.2. Ronald Callais (June 6, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA) .....	167
8.3. Pep and Bertha Williams (September 21, 2001; Galliano, LA) .....	170
9. AFTERWORD.....	175
10. REFERENCES .....	177

## PREFACE

The development of the offshore petroleum industry is a remarkable story of inventiveness, entrepreneurship, hard work, and risk-taking that turned Louisiana's relatively isolated coastal communities into significant contributors to the U.S. and global economies. This industry emerged as local residents and returning World War II veterans applied skills, technologies, and can-do attitudes to overcome the many challenges of producing oil from below the ocean floor. Offshore workers initially came from Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana, but soon people from throughout the United States were attracted to the Gulf Coast. This industry, born in the Louisiana marshes, has grown to have a key place in the modern world. Yet, it is little known, understood, or documented, and its dynamic economic role is virtually invisible.

To explore the history and evolution of this industry and the people and communities where it was born, in 2001 the U.S. Minerals Management Service (MMS) sponsored a study to examine the historical evolution of the offshore oil and gas industry and its effects on Louisiana's coastal culture, economy, landscape, and society. The study represented the convergence of the ideas of several people who recognized that an important piece of history – the origins of the offshore petroleum industry – was being lost and that capturing it would require the use of published works, periodicals and other documents, and oral histories. The idea for the study was supported by the Social Science Subcommittee of the MMS Scientific Committee, staff from MMS Headquarters and the Gulf of Mexico Region office in New Orleans, members of the business and academic communities, and Louisiana civic leaders and educators. As a result, researchers from universities in Louisiana, Texas, and Arizona came together to trace the development of the industry from land and marsh to state waters and then out across the Outer Continental Shelf.

Research of the MMS Environmental Studies Program provides information and analysis in support of MMS decision-making and assessment. From the beginning, a principal aim of the history study was to establish a collection of audio recordings of interviews with workers, company owners, family members, community leaders, and others whose lives were shaped by the offshore oil and gas industry in southern Louisiana. The focus of the study was on the earliest days, especially the period from the 1930's to the 1970's. Interviewees talked about how this industry grew from its fledgling beginning in the coastal wetlands and inner bays in the 1930's through the frenzied activity of the 1970's and beyond. The interviews ranged from very general conversations about life in southern Louisiana during this period to very specific discussions of particular aspects of the oil and gas industry.

The study began with a team of researchers from the Center for Energy Studies at Louisiana State University (LSU), the Departments of History and Business at the University of Houston (UH), the Program in Public History Studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL), and the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology at the University of Arizona (UA). The LSU team was led by Dr. Allan Pulsipher and included Ric Pincomb and Dr. Don Davis. Drs. Tyler Priest and Joseph Pratt led the UH team and were assisted by Jamie Christy, Joseph Stromberg, and Tom Lassiter. Suzanne Mascola transcribed the UH interviews. At ULL, Dr. Robert Carriker was assisted by Steven Wiltz and David DiTucci.

Drs. Diane Austin and Thomas McGuire of the UA were assisted by Ari Arand, Emily Bernier, Justin Gaines, Andrew Gardner, Mary Goode, Rylan Higgins, Scott Kennedy, Christina Leza, Karen Morrison, Lauren Penney, Jessica Piekelek, Dr. James Sell, Jeremy Slack, and Joanna Stone. UA researchers were supported by community assistants in Houma, Raceland, and New Iberia: Lois Boutte, Charlene Broussard, Norma Cormier, Nicole Crosby, Carolyn Cummings, Robyn Hargrave, and Debbie Toups. They received tremendous support from local organizations and individuals, especially the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, Bayou Native Bed and Breakfast, C.J. Christ, the Desk and Derrick Clubs of Morgan City and New Orleans, the Louisiana Technical College Young Memorial Campus, the Morgan City Archives, the Morgan City Daily Review, the Nicholls State University Archives, Steve and Jean Shirley, and the United Houma Nation.

Over 450 interviews were recorded during this study. The tapes and discs onto which the interviews were recorded and the transcripts of the interviews are available in the archives of the University of Houston, Louisiana State University, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and Nicholls State University. Each interview provides a unique look at the offshore oil and gas industry and its impacts on workers, their families, and their communities.

In addition to the recorded interviews, six volumes were produced during this project. The first, *Volume 1: Papers of the Evolving Offshore Industry*, is a collection of analytical papers, each of which deals with an important aspect of the evolution of the offshore oil and gas industry. That volume is followed by three more, *Volume 2: Bayou Lafourche – Oral Histories of the Oil and Gas Industry*; *Volume 3: Morgan City’s History in the Era of Oil and Gas – Perspectives of Those Who Were There*, and *Volume 4: Terrebonne Parish*, all of which examine the offshore oil and gas industry through the lens of a particular community or region of southern Louisiana. *Volume 5: Guide to the Interviews* summarizes information about the interviews, including how each interviewee became involved in the study, his or her family and/or occupational history, and particular highlights of the interview. The final volume, *Volume 6: A Collection of Photographs*, is a compilation of photographs, diagrams, and other visual images that were collected from interviewees during the study.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When personnel from the University of Arizona's Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology started to identify appropriate sites for a baseline study of the historic impacts of the oil and gas industry along the Gulf of Mexico in 1997, expert advice directed us to Lafourche Parish, particularly its lower half, south of the Intracoastal Waterway. We were looking for an area that had a long and deep involvement with the industry. All agreed that south Lafourche met that simple criterion, and had the additional distinction of being the locus of extraordinary activity in the 1990's. Bayou Lafourche, the main channel of the Mississippi River until as recently as the fourteenth century, now drains languidly into the Gulf at Port Fourchon. The port is a surreal admixture of million-dollar vacation homes ("camps" in local terms), modest and worse-for-wear crabbers' shacks, marinas for recreational fishing boats and offshore shrimp trawlers (many captained now by Vietnamese-Americans), and the complex of facilities supporting deepwater oil and gas exploration and production. The deepwater play – a hundred miles out into the Gulf, drilling in depths of 6000 feet and more – was the new frontier of the 1990's and is still going strong. Port Fourchon is strategically placed to service this sector. As a consequence, the economic health of the communities along the bayou has revived after the severe downturn of the 1980's. Deepwater development requires large supply and support vessels, and these are fabricated in shipyards along the Intracoastal at Larose. Massive amounts of supplies are barged down the bayou or trucked down to the port. A new highway, the "Four-lane," has been built to accommodate this load, although many truckers still use LA-1, the main street running along the bayou through the succession of line settlements – Cut Off, Galliano, Golden Meadow, Leeville, on to Fourchon, Cheniere Caminada, and, finally, to Grand Isle.

Banking on the hope that the deepwater oil and gas activity will be enduring and stable (and most industry analysts expect it to be, given the massive amounts of capital the major oil companies have invested), national chains are building motels to accommodate offshore shift workers and helicopter pilots. A Super Wal-Mart has been a fixture along the Four-lane behind Cut Off since the 1990's, and the boat companies, most still locally-owned, have built spacious new office complexes. One of these, the headquarters of Edison Chouest Offshore, is an incongruous local landmark, a glass-faced structure shaped as a ship's brow, sitting along the east bank of the Bayou Lafourche.

In our 1997 study, we were interested in the antecedents of this new prosperity, and we were directed to one of the area's civic leaders and an avid amateur historian, Windell Curole of the South Lafourche Levee District. His family had survived the Storm of 1893 that killed 564 residents of Cheniere Caminada and had moved up the bayou to safer ground. Windell now has the job of maintaining the hurricane protection levee that rings the most densely settled strip of lower Bayou Lafourche. Windell was busy pouring over maps of the levee district with the Levee Board's president, Leon Theriot. Mr. Theriot's handshake was that of a roustabout, belying his career in insurance. I explained the nature of the project. He said that oil was the best thing to happen to Bayou Lafourche, and the worst.

In the baseline historical study we were conducting, we moved on to other areas of the Gulf Coast for comparisons to lower Lafourche. Mobile Bay in Alabama is a recent entrant into the

offshore gambit, although the onshore processing facilities for “dirty gas” – hydrogen sulfide – blended readily into an already industrialized landscape of petrochemical plants and shipyards. Like much of the South, Mobile County is largely unzoned, so residents found themselves in the front yards of refineries. We then directed our attention to the Coastal Bend of Texas. Communities such as Ingleside and Aransas Pass, across the bay from Corpus Christi, have been among the major oil and gas staging areas and fabrication centers of Texas, but the region had a more diversified economy than simply hydrocarbons. Ingleside’s naval base is the “mine-sweeping capital” of America. Aransas Pass is a gentrifying town once focused on shrimping. The footprint of the oil and gas industry is lighter in coastal Texas and coastal Alabama, further highlighting the depth of south Louisiana’s ties.

In a second study, concentrating on the impact of the oil and gas industry on workers and their families, we conducted ethnographic work in two additional communities in Louisiana. Morgan City on the Atchafalaya River is an archetype for industry cycles. It grew rapidly and proudly in the 1970’s and suffered hard in the downturn of the mid-1980’s. New Iberia was, and is, likewise closely tied to the vagaries of the industry, but stakes its community identity on the encircling fields of cane and the dwindling number of sugar processing factories. Through both of these studies, through all the communities, we heard too many times that “you should have been there last year, two years ago.” People who knew these communities prior to the oil and gas industry, people who orchestrated the technological innovations to explore, drill, and produce in the marshes and bays of the coastal wetlands, people who ventured out into the open Gulf in the risky pursuit of the fossil fuel – they were passing away. A collective memory, residing in the recollections of the men and women of these settlements, was dying out.

We approached the Minerals Management Service, which had sponsored BARA’s previous projects, along with dozens of other social and environmental studies designed to inform the agency, policy makers, and the public about the impacts of the offshore oil and gas industry. We suggested the need for a project to begin to capture this collective memory. The MMS agreed and made the funds available for researchers from the University of Houston, the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, Louisiana State University, and the University of Arizona to do oral histories.

Oral histories can be a useful, and often indispensable, complement to the conventional historian’s use of documentary materials. There is, in fact, simply not a great deal of primary or secondary documentation of the development of the oil and gas industry along the Gulf Coast. Local historians abound, both professional and amateur, but their interests have not been drawn directly to the business of exploring for and producing oil and gas. Instead, hurricanes, the Civil War, sugar and cotton production, plantation life, and genealogy: these are predominant subjects. Oral histories are useful, as well, because incorporated towns with municipal governments – which might be expected to preserve community history through public records – are few along the Gulf Coast, indeed in the South as a whole. Moreover, blue-collar workers seldom write memoirs. They tend to preserve their memories in photographs, not the written word. Corporate histories can and have been done, but in numerous cases, corporate memories and paper trails have been erased through mergers, acquisitions, and closures. Many companies are quick to jettison documentation which is unnecessary to the immediate business at hand. Technological breakthroughs and developments are recorded in trade journals, but these treatments seldom

speak to the interface of “men and machines,” of how local people developed and modified these inventions and innovations.

Thus our research team collected oral histories throughout south Louisiana. I returned to Bayou Lafourche. Leon Theriot had passed away, but many others pondered his paradox – the best and the worst – about the oil and gas industry and its legacy.

The Louisiana Land and Exploration Company (LL&E) and other private parties had acquired hundreds of thousands of acres of wastelands in south Louisiana in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leasing some of it out to trappers and turning some of it over to visionary farmers, mostly from the Midwest, to dike, drain, reclaim, and cultivate. Most of the farming schemes were abject failures. The drained land subsided, the protective dikes often broke, water inundated fields and crops. Across south Louisiana, there are the remnants of these efforts: incongruous, neatly squared ponds. In 1928, LL&E would find a more lucrative use for its vast holdings: lease them to The Texas Company for the right to explore for oil. The Texas Company, later known as Texaco, completed a discovery well in Leeville in February, 1931, and the transformation of Bayou Lafourche commenced. The people who tell their stories here were caught up in that transformation and helped to shape it.

Preeminently, these are stories of survival and success. The oil and gas industry is volatile. Those working in the “upstream” end of the business, the exploration and production of hydrocarbons and the host of services required to support these activities, are often at the mercy of forces and events “downstream,” the demand, supply and price of refined products. These, in turn, are propelled by international geopolitics, supply shortages, and market gluts. Most recently, too, upstream activity can be dictated by boardroom activity. Mergers, acquisitions, consolidations, and divestitures, beginning first with the major oil companies, have spread throughout the industry to trucking outfits, drilling companies, boat builders and boat operators, and the specialized firms that supply technical and engineering services. In this flurry of corporate activity – where the “stockholder is our stakeholder,” as the investor-relations people at the companies put it – people typically lose jobs.

The individuals we interviewed had mostly retired prior to this new wave of uncertainty in the industry. But they faced their own trials. Some grew up during the Great Depression, some experienced the years of faltering progress when the federal government and the states along the Gulf contested ownership of the “Tidelands,” from the shoreline out to the Continental Shelf. Many were close to retirement when the industry took an infamous downturn in the 1980’s. Others, not quite ready to retire, were offered “the package” to get them off the payroll. One way or another, though, these people survived. And many of them, by any measure, were successful. Modest fortunes were made, lost, and made anew along Bayou Lafourche in the boat business, in drilling, and in servicing and supplying the oil and gas industry. Locals who hired on with the big companies enjoyed what sociologists would call “orderly careers,” moving up the ranks from roughneck or roustabout to drillers, toolpushers, field foremen, supervisors, occasionally to “top-floor” management, retiring with pensions, stocks, and options. By and large, these individuals reflect here on rewarding life experiences in an uncertain and dynamic line of work.

This recurrent theme of satisfaction – “Texaco was like a family” – is in part an artifact of sampling. The people who participated in the study were residents of the communities of south Louisiana. Thus, by definition, they were the survivors. Through the years, plenty of expectant laborers came to the region to work on the rigs, platforms, and boats, and soon moved away, unable or unwilling to adjust to the daily rigors and dangers of the worksite or the cycles of ups and downs. But locals have long grown accustomed to economic vagaries. There was a cypress boom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the trees were all logged out. Trapping in the marshes swayed with a fickle fashion market, as well as with the muskrat’s self-induced cycles of overpopulating and “eating out” its choice vegetation and destroying its habitat. Shrimp and oysters fluctuate seasonally and yearly, tied to environmental conditions. Their markets are controlled by events largely beyond the control of local fishermen. The cycles of the oil and gas industry, until quite recently, were taken in stride.

The oil and gas industry, first in the marshes and water bottoms, then on the Continental Shelf offshore, now into deeper and deeper water, transformed Bayou Lafourche and south Louisiana, but it did so with locals and outsiders ready to adapt to its demands.

### **1.1. A Note on Methods and Format**

The academic field of oral history strangely mimics the practical field of marshland loss. There is consensus about the nature of the core issues and little agreement about how to proceed. For marshlands, this plays itself out in more spending for additional plans and studies. The counterpart, in oral history, is introspection: writing about and wrangling over how much of the “shared authority” belongs to the person telling his or her own story, and the researcher presenting that story to a wider audience. “A shared authority” was Professor Michael Frisch’s (1990) apt phrase for the business of oral history, a collaborative effort in which the final product may vary from a very raw and real rendition of what was captured on tape to a highly polished, rearranged, and synthesized – and, many argue, unauthentic – artifact.

I won’t join this introspective enterprise. I will, however, highlight a few elements of format and method followed, more or less consistently, here.

- All interviews excerpted in this volume were conducted by McGuire, except for two: Dick Guidry (by Diane Austin) and Whitney Dardar (by Austin and McGuire).
- Tapes were transcribed by a number of individuals, then edited and “cleaned” by McGuire. The cleaning process consisted primarily of comparing the transcription against the tape, correcting place name spellings, deciphering “inaudible” segments wherever possible (at this point, the edited transcripts were preserved as largely verbatim documents for public use), then punctuating sentences and paragraphs to enhance understanding and readability, and deleting the superfluous “hmm,” typically intruded into the conversation by “the interviewer who cannot let a sentence escape from the interviewee’s mouth without a mumbled affirmation of its existence” (Allen, 1982, p. 45).

- Dialect patterns have not been replicated in the verbatim transcripts, nor in the edited versions, largely because of the difficulty in assuring phonetic consistency among a diverse group of transcribers. Students of linguistics and sociolinguistics are strongly encouraged to consult the tape recordings.
- Large segments of each conversation have not been presented in this volume (interviews typically lasted an hour and a half, often substantially longer, resulting in written transcripts of 20 or more pages). Passages selected here were done so for one or more of the following reasons: (1) they provided information and insight into the individual, the family, the region, or the industry; (2) they carried a story line through several time periods or across several individuals; or (3) they were funny in a way that reveals something meaningful about society and culture in south Louisiana.
- Ordering of passages is largely faithful to the progression of the conversation, which was, by design and often by necessity, open-ended and unstructured. Ordering of chapters is largely chronological. Neither of these ordering schemes is rigid, however. Few individuals with detailed, lived experiences for the days before oil and gas remain alive; some, however, could tell us stories of their early childhoods and their immediate ancestors, or give us vignettes of how they heard about what it was like in the old days. Most of those interviewed, of course, lived across much of the time frame of this research, and thus they reappear here at various points in this narration.
- Many of these individuals were interviewed on several occasions, and encountered on many more; the date of the formal, taped interview appears in the heading identifiers.

Finally, in only two cases did the interviewee specifically request a transcript copy for review, and the editing was largely confined to clarifying spellings of names and tools and pieces of equipment. That our procedure did not incorporate a blanket approval stage minimized the danger noted by oral historian Susan Allen, that interviewees may be “appalled by the ungraceful stops and starts and may edit you out of business when they receive a copy for their approval” (1982, p. 37). By not seeking such after-the-fact approval, however, the burden and the risk of the “shared authority” shift onto the researcher. All of these individuals did, of course, sign consent forms. Then they proceeded to talk quite openly and frankly about themselves, their families, their neighbors, and their places of work. I hope I have not unduly violated this trust.

## 2. THE EARLY YEARS ALONG BAYOU LAFOURCHE

Bayou Lafourche courses off from the main stem of the Mississippi at Donaldsonville, roughly halfway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. The bayou runs the length of the elongated parish, through the cane fields around the Lafourche Parish seat of Thibodaux, down the string of settlements lining the higher ground along the bayou, and into the Gulf at what is now the offshore supply base of Port Fourchon. Cane fields and sizable expanses of higher and dryer land pretty much stop at Larose. Below Larose, the bayou intersects the Intracoastal Waterway, a 20<sup>th</sup> century canal that demarcates an older social boundary. Below the Intracoastal, the line settlements continue along both banks of the bayou, but the land quickly slopes off to freshwater swamp, saltwater marsh, and the encroaching open waters of the Gulf. Commonly referred to as “south Lafourche,” the region south of the Intracoastal is largely Catholic, unobtrusively Cajun, and oriented economically to the once-abundant natural resources of the swamps, marshland, and water bottoms, out onto the Continental Shelf. People from south Lafourche refer to those in the northern part of the parish, and in fact anyone living above the Intracoastal, as “Yankees.” The northern part of the parish is still predominantly Cajun, but with a larger admixture of Anglo-Saxons who found their way to Louisiana to plant sugarcane in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A largely unbroken string of houses and businesses stretch from the Intracoastal down through Golden Meadow. These are nominally carved up into towns, Cut Off, Galliano, and Golden Meadow, but only the latter is incorporated, with boundaries marked off by warnings of a reduced and heavily-enforced speed limit. A more significant boundary in south Lafourche is the ring levee, built up over the last several decades to protect residents from the high waters and storm surges of hurricanes and to dry out the backlands away from the bayou banks. South of the ring levee are Houma Indian homes, shrimp sheds and crab shacks, the supply bases and docks that service the oil and gas industry, and the disappearing village of Leeville, originally established by survivors of the Storm of 1893. That hurricane decimated the even more precarious communities of Cheniere Caminada and Grand Isle. Grand Isle is a beach ridge that forms a true barrier island.

Before the discovery of the Leeville and Golden Meadow oil fields in the 1930’s, local inhabitants pursued a seasonal succession of wild resources: muskrats and then the introduced pest, nutria, through the winter; shrimp, crabs and finfish in the spring and through the summer. Oysters were available for harvest year-round, but the lack of ice made them undesirable during the warmer months. Commercial hunting of wildfowl was also conducted in this terminus of the Mississippi Flyway, and a penchant for decoy carving continues among local craftsmen. Wild resources were supplemented by household gardens and hogs. Lard-cured pork provided a staple. Butchering was an occasion for social gatherings.

These resources provided subsistence, but they were also actively marketed, much to the French Market along the river in New Orleans. Ingenious methods for drying shrimp were developed by Chinese and Filipino immigrants, and the product was exported to Asia. With the spread of ice-making equipment and packing sheds and the acceptance of the motorized trawler by the 1920’s, shrimping for regional markets became a dominant activity. Oyster planting and harvesting on water bottoms leased from the state also provided substantial rewards. As the economy grew

more and more reliant on oil and gas extraction, locals with navigational skills and knowledge of the marsh and the Gulf of Mexico became indispensable. As market tastes changed and swamps and marshes eroded, fur-trapping became unviable. Shrimping and oystering continue, but face recurrent problems of either too many shrimp boats, too low a price, high operating expenses, or industrial and agricultural pollution. Most residents are still avid hunters, but for sport. A local dance hall is named the “Fed Pond,” a reference to the practice, now frowned upon by the state, of putting grains into the water around duck blinds.

## **2.1. Chester Cheramie (March 4, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*Born in Golden Meadow in 1923, Chester Cheramie was one of seven siblings in a trapping and fishing family. He graduated from high school, spent three and a half years in the Navy, then returned to Golden Meadow and worked as a roustabout for several years. His father-in-law had a barroom, which Chester operated for fifteen years before going to work for Cheramie Brothers' boat company. He then worked in the office, doing mainly personnel, purchasing, and promotional work, for Nolte Theriot's boat company. After 26 years at that job, he retired at age 74. One of his sons has a Ph.D. and directs the CODOFIL program (Council for the Development of French in Louisiana) out of Lafayette. CODOFIL was created by the Louisiana State Legislature in 1968 at the behest of several Lafayette-based cultural activists, and has worked to preserve and revive Cajun traditions and reintroduce the teaching of French in the public schools of south Louisiana. Chester and many other residents of south Lafourche carry painful memories of their school days when they were punished for speaking French. The state's Board of Education outlawed the use of French in public classrooms in 1916, and the Constitution of 1921 ratified the prohibition.*

*I met Chester at the Fête de cochon in Cut Off in March, 2002. This boucherie (hog slaughtering) is held annually, reproducing a pattern whereby, prior to refrigeration, families would periodically butcher a pig and prepare the meat and internal organs for consumption by extended families and neighbors. At this fête, an Americorps student from up the bayou had the honor of dispatching the pig. The occasion is hosted and prepared by a group of men from south Lafourche, each allowed to invite their families and two guests. When I returned to the fête in March of 2003, Chester Cheramie had passed away. His widow was given a plaque commemorating Chester's activities with the group.*

My name is Chester Cheramie from Golden Meadow, Louisiana. I was born in 1923, and finished school in Golden Meadow High School. After school I joined the Navy and spent three and half years in the Navy. I returned to my home in 1945. First job I had was working in the oil field, roughnecking, and did that for about two years, then I went into the barroom business that my father-in-law gave me and I stayed there about 15 years. From there I went to work for the Cheramie Brothers in the boat business and my job was mostly work in the office but my daddy all during his life was a fisherman and was born and raised in the bayou down in Golden Meadow. As a kid, for a living, I went trapping in the marsh and we would leave in October and we would return back home the end of March, so we would lose about three and half months of school and tryin' to catch up in those days was kind of hard. My mom and dad didn't know how to read and write. I learned the best of my knowledge from friends. When we spent not only wintertime in the swamp trapping but we also went fishing and trawling and everything we had

to do to survive in those days -- that was back in the Depression. We were a family of seven kids and every kid had to work to hustle that nickel and dime. We did that. We had to peel shrimp, open oysters, everything we had to do. I went into the service and came back and things got a little better and I got married back in 1944, about a year before going to the service. In the three and a half years I did spend in the service I traveled world-wide and those were the best years of my life.

*So you've been working, participating in this boucherie for a long time?*

Around 27 years we've been having this thing. And it first started...there was 15 of us. Fifteen guys got together and just chipped in a couple of bucks then. We'd have one pig and kill it and do everything. We would just bring our families. And then it got to growing. It went from 15 to 20. From 20 it went up another five. As of right now we've got 50 members. And that costs us, you know, 50 dollars a year. If you want to join we've got a waiting list. We cut it to 50 because -- I mean we could have 100 guys but the more trouble. So every member can invite two guests. And we've got enough people to do all the work. Saturday morning you saw all the work was done. A lot of help. I didn't do nothing, me. Not much. So, that's the way it goes, you know? I am the only original left that's still active. They were just a bunch of guys that used to play golf together and they got an idea. They said, "What are we goin' to do in the winter time?" So that's how the whole thing started. So, you know, just a bunch of friends and their wives and kids. That's it. And then word got around and everybody wanted to get in. For a long time we stayed at 15 till all of a sudden some of the original guys dropped out, you know. Then we got some new people come in then they'd drop out all down the line. That's where it used to be. This past year that one guy that dropped out and we got a list a mile long so we picked up another guy. So that's the way we go. We pick the first on the list. You don't vote or nothing. Most of these guys are young fellas and want to work. So an old guy like me steps back and lets them do the work. That's the story about that thing.

In the old days, every family -- now I am talking years ago -- in those days you did not have any refrigeration and things like that. And the meat was scarce. You did not have the money to buy. So what people would do...they'd make a hog pen. And then they'd feed the little bitty hog with all the trash throughout the year. Fatten him up, you know, one or two of them. And then all in the neighborhood, they'd come and kill the pig. Cut it all up. And what they do... as you probably saw yesterday -- all that grease. When you put all that grease and lard in there it is just like cooking oil. So they put the meat in it. Cut the thing in slabs and put it in a big tin can. Put the meat in there to keep it preserved. So during the year, you needed some meat, you'd go and take one piece, cooking it up and then you'd take the lard, make a fire, and the grease would fall in the pan and you'd save it and cook with that. So like that you would not lose nothing. So that's how they all started. Everybody on the bayou used to do that. That's how they would preserve the meat and have something to eat beside during the year, besides having shrimp, crab, and fish and everything else. Now, down in this part of the country, everybody got all the fish and shrimp and oysters they wanted but that was the only meat they had.

All the fisherman...you know, everybody had a relative. Everybody is related down here anyhow. During the shrimp season and all they'd bring in sacks stuffed with shrimp and crab. They'd give them a sack or two of potatoes and they'd give them some onions because they all

had farms over there. So then they would exchange. They'd give them shrimp, crab, fish whatever and they'd give them all the vegetables, potatoes, and onions, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, all that stuff, you know? Nobody had money to...nobody had no money. I remember my daddy...when he would go trawling... They had one mother boat. They called it the mother boat. All the other boats catch all day long. They all bring their catch to the mother boat. When he had a load, he would come back to Golden Meadow to the shrimp shed and deliver those shrimp. Then they'd get so much a barrel, you know, of shrimp. Every mother boat had a company. And all of these companies had a grocery store. So you had to go yourself to the grocery store, and everything was no money. There was no money exchanged. Everything was put on the books. And then two seasons, they had the May season and they had the August season. Shrimp season. And after that, then you go trappin' and all that. After the season, that's when they split the money. That's when you'd pay the grocery bill. Not only groceries -- the grocer had clothes, hardware, just like a supermarket today. So you had to go to that store and my daddy, the company he worked for... so we couldn't go to the other store. They must have had 10, 12 stores in Golden Meadow. You had to go to the store. You don't have a choice. People had no money. They had no money.

*Were these company stores pretty honest with the people that they were working with?*

Well, some of them were. Let's put it that way. Some of them were. Some were pretty honest. Like I said in the beginning, all these people like my dad and all these guys, they had no education. They never went to school. If you tell them their name, they did not even know their name. They did not know how to read and write. And all those people that had those little stores and they had a little education. I mean, they knew how to read and use numbers and stuff like that but a guy like my dad and many, many others...they see their name and they did not know it was their name because they did not know how to read. Now, they might know the number. But some of them really got screwed even though they were honest. That's the only way you can make a living, you got to trust the guy. At least while you were working, your family had something to eat and a little piece of cloth on their back. You either had to trust them or starve to death. That's the way it was in those days. Everybody survived...I know some of them that really got screwed, you know? That was...you can't prove it but everybody knew that, you know? Well I come in with 100 boxes of shrimp. Oh no, it was not 100, maybe it was 50. You know? I am going to say 95, maybe. So you screwed him out of five boxes. So that's five box for him in his pocket, you know what I am saying? A lot of them did that. If someone didn't know how to count, you know?

Then you start all over again. You start August, September, October and then you settle up again. By that time you'd get ready to go in a marsh...trapping. So you'd trap October, November, December...then January, February you start coming home. So you'd be in the marsh four, five months. Same thing with that. The muskrat that you catch... the property belonged to one guy. And then you'd catch muskrat on his property. And then you'd have to sell to him and he'd pay you so much a pelt. And the same thing. When the season's over you split what you make. So all the time you never had any money. That thing was very little money that you would get. So until you started in the oil field back in the late '30's, that's when people start having a little money because they would come here and they'd spud into the oil well. I don't know how much oil was selling then. Guess it wasn't but one or two dollars a barrel. But

you could get maybe your share for 15-20 cents. They keep the rest. So a lot of these people would get a 200, 300 dollar check a month. That was a lot of money for those people because they did not have nothing before. And then from there it is up to the war. That's when people, you know, after the war, started making money. You came back from the war, people got more knowledge of the world. In fact myself, I had been to New Orleans but one time in my life before I went into the service. But the closest I had been... had only been one time. I had gone to Thibodaux or something like that, but I had never been out of the state. That's all, you know, I don't know how far back but the only thing that we had was radio. And most of the time we did not have one. If you had a radio you were lucky to have one. Now, these young kids today think that everyone was born with a television and car in their yard. And you tell them about some of these stories about how these people started in business and they don't believe you. All these people, they were all fisherman. That's how they got started. And we survived. There was seven of us. There was seven kids. And my youngest sister died when she was seven years old from pneumonia. She was only seven. And my sister passed away about eight, ten years ago. She had a cancer. My brother, one brother, he passed away about eight, nine years ago from cancer. So we only have four of us left now. Mom and Daddy both passed away. So every time I look back and think how we survived all these years, and it made me wonder. Why are some of us still here and others are gone?

My brother went into the [oil] business. Well, my brother started...he went into the service, Merchant Marine. And when he come out he went to work for Halliburton. He worked for Halliburton quite a few years. Like my daddy. My daddy worked in tug boats and all that. And he got interested in boats. Me, I never could get interested in boats. So after a few years with Schlumberger he decided -- him and one of his wife's brother -- decided to go into the boat business. His partner had what was called a clipper. And that's how they got started. Like everybody else, he got started back at a bad time, back in the '50's, but they survived. And then he passed away about eight, nine years ago. Since then his son took over. Still got the company. Nine or ten boats now.

I worked in the boat industry all my life. As far as working on the boats, I never did. I always worked in the office, or like I said, PR work, stuff like that. Met a lot of people. After that, anywhere you go you ask my name, they know me. So that's why I never got in boats I don't know, probably because I didn't know that much about it. All mechanical work. And I was in the Navy three and a half years so there was no reason I shouldn't have done it. But again as a kid I didn't like boats. My daddy wanted me to go in a boat as a kid and I hated it. Like I said, being seven kids -- I am the oldest one out of seven -- and the only one that went to finish high school because one of the reasons was because I didn't want to work in a boat with him so my mother insisted that I go to school. My sister and brother, they went to school but they never did graduate. I am the only one that graduated. I wasn't always the sharpest one in the club but I got away with it. I enjoyed it, you know?

When I went to school, I didn't speak English, period. But at the school we could not speak French at all. If we did we'd get whipped. In those days they whipped the piss out of you. What happened is we were like brainwashed. You can't speak French. You got to speak English. You got to speak English. You got to speak English. And then when I got married and our kids come along so, being brainwashed, we taught them...they spoke English to us. My three

kids...the oldest one, she understands. The second one, well she will speak some but not much. And my son, well. Now, he knows French. Growing up in a house with myself, my wife, and my mother-in-law...he's 11 years younger than my youngest daughter. In other words, another family. So he grew up with his grandma, his mom, and me. So his grandma always talked French and he spoke English to her, you know, as a communication. He went to South Lafourche and he went to Loyola. He went to Nicholls for a year and then he went to Loyola. He graduated from Loyola. Somehow or other he got involved in CODOFIL program. So he went to France and studied there for one year. At the university. And then he met his wife. He came back to LSU for a year. He went to law school for a year and then he found a girlfriend. Followed him here. They got married and she became his wife. She did not like it here at the time so they moved back to France. He stayed in France for seven years and then two of his kids was born over there. And then all of a sudden he started coming back home ...12 years ago. He came back about 12 years ago. And he got his masters. And then he got his doctorate degree two, three years ago at USL. Since then he's been in charge of CODOFIL program. He brings all these...he interview people from different countries speaking French that come over here. And they are trying to get the French back in the community. And, you know, the way he tells me in the Lafayette area they really got going for a long time. Lafourche Parish is kind of slow.

A lot of people are pushing it. I think it will take another year or two but eventually they'll get it. I think it is my generation that says that we did not talk to the kids in French. It is because we were brainwashed in going to school. So you lost a whole generation, you know, of French. I went to school starting seven years old. Six years old. When you are six years old you ain't know nothing anyhow and you are told you can't speak French, you have to speak English. You get whipped or get some homework... How can you speak English if your mom and dad didn't know how to speak English? You know what I mean?

Most [of the teachers] were from outside. They all spoke English. They didn't speak French. All the teachers on my side, they didn't speak French so if you did they didn't know what you were talking about. So this made it rough because if the teacher would have been speaking French, then it would not have been as bad... When you get around here someplace, someone talk in English, and then another guy starts talking French and then back to English. So it's just a habit. Sometimes you just get off track. And I guess this is why it made it so hard for us growing up. By that time, by the time we all got out of school and all that, the war broke out. And that's it. You came back home, and if everybody hadn't gone all over the country, French would have stayed. Follow me? Because myself and all the rest of the young men that went into the service, they came back and they all spoke English. So they came back home and all got married and started talking English. I think that's where we missed the boat. A lot of these guys that stayed home, they could talk French, you know what I am saying? We just missed the boat.

*Were most of the kids from your generation drafted in the service?*

Oh yeah. In this town here, I think it was about five guys that did not go into the service. The whole town. All got drafted or volunteered. They all went into the service. So we had two boys...three of them. I forget whether it was my senior year or junior year. One was 16. The other two were 17. They joined the Army, right before the war broke out. I think they were both juniors or seniors, you know. They were young. And all during the war they were together.

And through the war all come back and they made I think seven invasions. Never got hurt. They made the Sicily invasion and the southern France invasion. They made five, six invasions there and they came back. They sent them back in the Pacific. They were ready to go to war with Japan when the war finished. There are quite a few guys who've got some medals.

## 2.2. Loulan Pitre (September 24, 2001; Cut Off, LA)

*Loulan Pitre, Sr. lives with his wife, Emelia, in a modest house along a lane on the Highway 1 side of the bayou in Cut Off. He still maintains a substantial vegetable garden down the lane and, like most of the people of the region, is an avid hunter. Now in his 80's, Loulan spent an arduous working life, first oystering with his father, then shrimp, then building and tearing down oil derricks, and finally, running crew boats for Chevron. Of the Pitre's four sons, one, Loulan, Jr., is attorney for Port Fourchon and a state legislator. Another, Glen, is a local historian and movie producer. Many of his films, including "Belizaire the Cajun" and "Huit Piastres et Demie/\$8.50 a Barrel!" about the shrimp war along Bayou Lafourche in 1938, use local residents as extras. Several of the people interviewed were quite familiar with the notion of "consent forms," having signed Glen Pitre's release forms for appearing in his films.*

*In 1904, Loulan's father acquired a narrow tract of land, one-half arpent wide at its front along the bayou, going back 40 arpents into the marsh. The subsequent history of this tract is revealed in court documents surrounding a trespass suit Loulan brought against Tenneco Oil Company in 1976. La Terre Company had acquired the marshland adjacent to the back end of the Pitre property and began issuing trapping leases in 1927. In the late 1940's, the elder Pitre granted a right-of-way to the Lafourche Parish Police Jury for a drainage ditch at the rear of his property, 37 arpents from the front. Shortly thereafter, La Terre granted a right-of-way next to the drainage ditch for a natural gas pipeline. Tenneco acquired La Terre's interests, began patrolling the pipeline with boats running through the drainage canal, and erecting "No Trespassing" signs on Pitre's side of the ditch. Tenneco also issued a trapping lease to Alces Pitre, husband of Loulan's cousin. Loulan's family had never bothered to obtain a written trapping lease from Alces. Loulan admitted in court that he and his neighbors had tacitly acquiesced in Alces' nominal trespassing for 50 years: "Things were hard enough. Everybody let him trap. They didn't think about leases" (Pitre v. Tenneco Oil Company 385 So. 2d 840). What brought Tenneco's presumed trespassing to Loulan's attention were the "No Trespassing" signs. This is how the court record reads:*

*Pitre said he noticed the signs on his neighbors' property before any was placed on his land, but he did not feel it was his business to meddle in his neighbors' affairs. Although Pitre saw the signs on his neighbors' property in prior years, the first "No Trespassing" sign he says he saw on his tract was in 1973. "We chopped them down," he said. "They were excellent tomato stakes, the 2 X 2's were and I threw the rest in the canal or in the brush on my land."*

*The Appeals Court ruled in 1980 that Pitre's act of removing the signs was sufficient to express his possession of the disputed property, and awarded his \$1,500. Three different judges on the same court overturned this ruling in 1986. Loulan lost his claim to the three arpents of land in*

*dispute but retained an abiding interest in the politics and geography of land in southern Louisiana.*

I don't know if you know how the state appropriated all these marsh lands. They used to be known as overflow lands. Overflow lands, that's the keyword. When Louisiana became a state the federal government still had ownership of all the overflow lands. It covered just about half the state of Louisiana. So here, I think it's in '47 [1849] the government of the United States donated all the overflow lands except what had been granted or not sold for taxes. A lot of people in the Civil War came in between and which left a lot of overflow land and naturally Louisiana... people were trapping on these lands. Trapping was the mainstay, there was no oil. Now trapping was big business, everybody is trapping the muskrat, the mink, everything. So, let's see. They keep trapping, trapping. In 1901 the trappers start getting flack. Some people comes around and says they can't trap anymore, unless they paid for leases. This had never happened before. They got word that they start buying those leases, those trapping leases. The reason for that...who owns this property? It's Louisiana Land and Trapping Company owns it now. Louisiana Land and Trapping Company who are the owners. I'm not in the picture then when this is developing. There was a fellow by the name of Steinberg – you might have heard of him, the big company. He had been leasing, before Louisiana Land and Trapping Company had taken it upon himself to lease to the trappers. He guaranteed to buy the furs and bring them groceries in his boats, if they would deal strictly with him. So that's the way Steinberg got rich.

He got a big old store, just buy groceries for the trappers. It was a lucrative business because those furs, they call it the ebb and flow of the fur business, sometimes you get a fortune, other times you can't give them away. There's always days they sold pretty well... From '41 to '44 things are pretty quiet, because everything is in turmoil because of the war that was going on. Back from the war, jobs are scarce after World War II, now you see I skip, I skip finding all the oil in Leeville down here. Talking about what I know, I'm not saying it's what happened. I know what happened but I'm not going to quote anybody. They find oil right down this bayou in Leeville...1933, the later part of 1932. A pool of oil that's never been seen before. My father owns property there, it's never leased. Well, some explain, I never knew anything about the oil business. He says there is no oil, that's the way oil is. It's in a pool and you can be 50 feet away and not get a drop. Texaco was the only company drilling, and a lot of people raised questions. That was when people started to get hired. Texaco brought people from Texas. They didn't bring much because they didn't have too many people to bring, because it was a young company. They started hiring people here, and then there was little luggers. Everything was in the marsh. That's why they chopped up the wetlands. Ever seen a map of the wetland? It's crisscrossed like a town square, you know? So, flights would come in for the Texaco people – I'll go to something else after this. And then they learned. The first thing you know, they hired people from down here, roustabouts. We're talking Depression here, you work in the oyster business all month, all month for 15 dollars. That was the Depression. Sell 200 pounds of shrimp for four dollars. Had to pay on the boat, your own lugger, that was two people in a lugger. Income wasn't much more than 200 dollars a year, annual, annual income and that's for the fisherman. Here comes these people in this oil company started giving six, seven, eight dollars a day. That's a fortune! They started to work, they started to work and it was hard work. They were earning that money. Putting those pipelines in the marsh all day long and no retirement plan – you

couldn't do the work, you were out. And no union either, Texaco never had a union, never. But it was still just Texaco. The Gulf, the Gulf Oil Company was seismographing...in the water, in the lakes, all at once Gulf moves somewhere. They went out in the Gulf -- Gulf Oil Company seismographic -- they knew oil was there. They just couldn't get to it, they didn't have the equipment. Texaco kept the lakes.

Now how did Texaco inherit all the water bottom? Nobody knew. After the war, marshlands belonged to these racketeers. Some state representatives got some big slices of it, a big time lawyer, he got some big chunks. I says, "Woah," I said, "I'm going to go to Baton Rouge." No, no, let me tell you about how I found out about the marshlands given away to these cats from Ohio or wherever. I says, "Let's go see." I've got enough of this down here, everybody's a trapper. They were still living then. Who'd they paid the leases to? "Oh, no, we didn't pay the leases to anybody." How could I understand? I had gone through that deal, I knew they were trapping, the lease was not...they were getting short changed on their furs, overcharged for their groceries, the equipment. I says, "Let's go find out how Louisiana Land...." No, I went to go see my state representative. I says, "Just who is Louisiana Land?" I says, "Listen, I can't go hunting." I'm talking to my state representative. I says, "I can't go hunting on my own property – they chase me away." He says, "Loulan, Louisiana Land is the state." "Oh, that's really interesting." I have no business being there, so then a state agent chased me off. I didn't tell him the time of day. I says, "This is what we have for state representatives?" Talk about Louisiana politics -- you see, he don't understand what's going on.

I went back to Baton Rouge...I don't care if it takes me a week...I'm going to find out what happened. Man, did I stir up a hornet's nest. I go to the state capitol – they didn't want to talk about it. Oh no? I says, "I want to know how Texaco got all the water bottoms." Oh, they give me the brush off. "Oh, they made some deal with Huey Long and that bunch of crooks." I says, "What kind of deal?" I said, "Tell me." "It was a deal made that was all recorded in Thibodaux." I was making a little progress, slow but surely. I come to Thibodaux [county seat of Lafourche Parish], and says, "I want to see the agreement, an agreement between Texaco and the state of Louisiana." An agreement between Huey Long and his henchmen and Texaco, that's what the agreement was. I came to Thibodaux. "No, no, the agreement's not here, it's in Baton Rouge!" My temperature is about 112. I go back to Baton Rouge. "Would you write me down a little note, a little memo that there is no such agreement in your court?" He wouldn't do it. I assumed that he had it, but he wouldn't part with it. It was too high up the stairs for him to climb. I went to the state land office. Attorney General gives me the brush off but he's probably politically pressured, that's why he said that. I went to the state land office and I sat there. I said, "I want the agreement between Texaco and the state of Louisiana." Simple statement. "We don't believe such an agreement exists." Tell me that in the state land office. I said, "The clerk of court told me yesterday that you had it here in the state land office, and you tell me it doesn't exist." Who's lying? I said, "I've been going back and forth. I can't keep that up. Somebody is lying. Both of you make two statements here and one of them's got to be wrong." "Well, let me go look," he said. This is the big wheel, you can tell I'm talking to the big chief of the state land office. He said, "Let me go look." He comes back 20 minutes later, red in the face. Boy he was bucking up his ear. He said, "I can let you read it here but I can't let you take it out of here." I said, "No sir, I want to take a copy." I says, "It's public documents, I can have a copy." "Well, you can't have a copy. Sir, I got to go through channels to get a copy. Why don't you read it?

You can know everything that's on it." I said, "Let me read it." Better than than nothing. I read it; I start to see, Huey Long, Seymour White, Dick ... all in the penitentiary, have all signed it. Given all the water bottoms to the -- I have to read the agreement again -- I think it said the signature was Huey Long. Huey signed it. And his buddy, they all went to prison and Huey got shot. I said, "Sir, I read it and I don't like what I see. So I need a copy." "I told you, you couldn't have a copy." "Sir, I need a copy or I'll have to subpoena you to give me a copy, public records." "Well let me go see." He disappears, a good 20 minutes, makes me wait like a doctor and I don't even know what's wrong, he makes me wait. I sat down, I was not concerned because I expected nothing. That was the same politician running the state so what could I expect. He came back. He says, "I'll let you have copy but just one copy." That's all I need. "Sir, I'll be real grateful if you gave me a copy. It'll fit in real nice with my work that I'm doing on this project." To believe I was running the project. He goes over there and gives me the whole agreement between Louisiana Land and Exploration Company and the state of Louisiana. The agreement was Louisiana Land and Exploration was going to get total control over all the water bottoms and Baton Rouge was going to get royalties from the water bottoms. Good Lord. It was Texaco, it wasn't Louisiana Land and Exploration yet. It comes along later.

The agreement was with Texaco. Then we have to get into an agreement 'cause Texaco was a puny little company when it got here. Texaco wasn't big; they just saw what they had after that agreement. They needed help. They were in cahoots with the Louisiana Land and Planning [Exploration] Company. Oh it's a long history but okay let's stop right there and go back to how Louisiana Land and Planning [Exploration] Company got the land. When the state... after all the deal was done the federal government in, I think '47 [1849], told the states that they would have the overflow lands in their domains. Before they did this they had to go to every township, every section, choose, and check off what had not been deeded by the federal government because the federal government had given out land grants all the time. The Congress had to approve this. After all this had been approved, the state could appropriate all the swamplands with no private ownership. Lo and behold, I don't know the time spans between all this happening but it wasn't more than a couple of years. They created those levee boards and the levee boards took over control of the land that the United States had, I shouldn't say the land, the swampland that United States had ceded to the states and take all the assets. They know who's paid taxes on this property. All the rest they checked out for themselves and then, in the meantime we had the Civil War. A lot of people had land grants, they had been killed, or some left and never came back. There were two guys. Now these two people – I've been having trouble tracking down where they came from but they make their appearance. First appearance was a fellow by the name of John Dresser, and Edward Wisner from Ohio. Came down and bought all the overflow land, not bought, they had the levee board sign a quit claim. A quit claim.

You have no recourse and the levee board was going to pay all fees to certify these claims that Wisner and Dresser were going to make. All for the sum of, they bought it for the sum of 100 thousand dollars, 20 thousand dollars down cash. And so, I have to stop here and go back to all these agreements. Texaco had that all wrapped up... that LL&E had originated. I couldn't find it, I went to the archives at LSU, nothing, nothing. There was no Wisner, no Dresser, nothing, nothing about LL&E. So I go to the levee board, and the levee boards ceded the land to Wisner and Dresser for 20 thousand dollars. But the levee board, they kept control of the improvements. In the first week they were on that they spent 20 thousand dollars to fix up Wisner and Dresser.

So, it's a good start. I went to the levee board at Atchafalaya, but nobody... all these levee boards, they just organized levee boards as they went along. But at Atchafalaya, it was one of the first ones organized under the laws of the state. I went to the Atchafalaya office, boy they were mad as hornets in there. I said, "I want to see the sale of the Atchafalaya Levee Board to Wisner and Dresser. I found out there that they were..." "Oh, what are you talking about?" So it's all public information, "I want to see the bill of sale from the levee board to Wisner and Dresser." "What bill of sale? It's not a bill of sale! They robbed, they robbed the levee board!" "Well, that's what I'm going to find out." There was one woman in there, "Woah you're a mad man, who do you represent? I'm the executive secretary of the board and they want to fire me!" They had learned that somebody was digging in the record. That was me. I was looking for dead people who owned property. I had done some work. She says, "They want to fire me!" I says, "You have a copy (I shouldn't have said that) of the bill of sale, of the levee board to Wisner and Dresser?" "Certainly do." "Can I have one?" "Certainly can!" Boy, she was angry. She went and got me four sheets written by candlelight. All the legal terms didn't fit in there. The grammar was real bad. A quit claim! I get to the word "quit claim without recourse," and then the levee board agrees to pay for all legal costs! Thousands of people, you know, and you don't want to get in trouble with this lousy person who's been living 50, 60 years and he's not on his land, he's on somebody else's. They gave me a copy. I could not believe what I read. I could see where they were holding the high ground because it was legal. This thing was legal so I says to myself, "Why if it's so darn legal..." She says, "It's legal, you can look into it, it's legal!" I says, "If it's so legal, why isn't a copy in the clerk of court's office in Lafourche Parish?" It was not. She says, "All public records, land records, realty records are supposed to be with the clerk of courts." Legal is legal, I have my copy. "I'll help you out, ma'm. I don't think they'll fire you." They did. My fault.

### **2.3. Steven Charpentier (September 12, 2002; Galliano, LA)**

*Steven Charpentier made a living on the water, shrimping for 47 years. He's been retired for six years, and is 71. He is an avid duck carver, on the board of directors of a carving club. He intends to donate many of his carvings to the Cajun Heritage Museum that is being planned in Larose. During the interview, his uncle came over from next door to ask for help loading a huge TV into the car to take back to Wal-Mart. The TV had shorted out during the big electric storm in the afternoon (the uncle warned a teenage girl in the house not to tell that to Wal-Mart, just to say it broke). Later in the interview, the uncle returned, saying that Wal-Mart had to order a replacement 35-incher, so we unloaded the broken TV into the carport. Steven lives on the "308 side," across the bayou.*

Now his (Steven's uncle) dad and my dad would go and unload the shrimp that they caught in that day's work and put it into those somewhat bigger boats. In the lake. That was all in lake fishing. And then they would bring that right there in Golden Meadow. They had a factory there that could process the shrimp and put them in cans. White shrimp. They would not trawl those brownies like we trawl. They would not trawl that at all. Did not have to. They had enough white shrimp. That's what I meant -- in those days nobody would fish in bayous, small bays, duck ponds, whatever. None of that. As the shrimp went out they'd catch them, they'd process them. The shrimp was big enough in those days to even peel shrimp with the people. Peel them. Peel them by hand. Now, you've got a machine to peel them. And a machine can peel them that

long. In those days, they did not catch them that long because you could not peel them, so you had to catch the bigger size. If you go in that little bay ... you would catch the little ones. Then you'd go to deliver that to that boat... well they'd say, "We are not going to take your day's work today. Be sure not to go there tomorrow or we ain't going to buy your shrimp."

*So the boats then were owned by the canning...?*

No, everybody had their own boat. The cannery had their processing cannery factory there. Had that, but they did not own the boat. Hubert Lafont had something like four boats that would bring ice and go ice up in those boats. And in two and a half days you would load one boat. In the next day and a half ...two and a half days. Well, another boat. Four boats. They had four boats. And then from Cut Off -- people over there -- we would have some bigger boats with three, four boats. They call that the ice boat because they would bring ice, you see? And like my dad and all would not have ice on the boat. He just would fish today and go bring that...not all day. They would go deliver [at] 12. Go back in the evening and make two, three, four drags and deliver whatever they caught. They would stay something like a month out there. In the lake. It would take you from here to where you enter that lake, about two and a half, three hours at the most.

*Which lake?*

Lake Timbalier. Then you've got, on this side of Bayou Lafourche, Grand Isle, you've got Grand Lake over there, on the east side of Bayou Lafourche. The ice boat would bring in bread. That's about the only thing that it would bring. They'd make a grocery bill with cans, with canned stuff to cook. And they was most likely eat shrimp, crab, fish. They would catch them in the nets. They would buy very few groceries. The groceries had to be in cans because you didn't have no ice. No ice box or nothing. You just had a piece of salt meat hanging off a nail in the back of the boat, underneath the cabin. And then that's what meat they had. Piece of salt meat. And they would cut a piece to put in what they were going to cook that day. It was miserable -- I've seen myself -- and they had one bed in those boats. One bed. And you'd have to have a... for mosquitoes, how do you call that? You roll your bed and you put it on top of the hatch over that. Over the ice hold. But we did not have no ice. And then you'd put that over a mosquito thing so that the mosquito would not get at you. And in the month of August, they are like nowadays, you can have two, three squalls in the same night. So you'd have to run in there and the engine room was so hot in there and you could hardly stand going in there much less sleep. And when it stopped raining you'd take your bed, go back, and try some more. I've seen myself do that three times in the same night. One barrel of fresh water that you had. And then the engine was tractor fuel...you'd start it with tractor fuel and then you'd switch it to diesel. And tractor fuel, what was that? For prime, I guess, to start it. And then you'd switch over and it would burn diesel. Most likely the boat had some 20, 30, 40 horsepower in those days. And like those bigger boats that would bring in the shrimp...you had something like Fairbank motors. You had 60 horsepower. That's how much horsepower they had in those days.

That boat there [along the street in Golden Meadow]... the *Petite Corporal* they called it. It was a boat like what you saw there. I know how to build little boats. I got two of them that I built... that I carved. And then my dad... when I was seven, eight years old, carved a little boat. I got it there. It is 60 somewhat years old. I still have it.

*I heard you carve ducks too.*

Oh yeah. I carve them. Now, something awful happened to me. You see...I took the feather. That's the real feather. I took the other one. I painted it. Somehow my uncle was on the porch right there and it was raining. I took the feather. Brought it there. Somewhere down the line look at what happened on to it right here. This was all together. Now, it's all messed up. I don't know what... because they've got a contest, you know?

*So that's a carving?*

Yeah, that's a carving.

*That's fantastic.*

But I sure wish... maybe if I put a little bit of something... like shoe-shine. Maybe I could get those feathers back together because it was really together. Just like this one. It was together. I've got a little bit too much white, you know? I was going to re-paint on it. Try to get...

*So how does the contest work? You bring them all in and someone judges them?*

Yeah, they've got judges, judges. They have got judges for, like this feather here... if I was to win I would get 50 dollars. And then you have to give it away to the auction. Make money for the club, you know? I'm a board member. And then you give it. And then whatever it sells for... we have fun. But we have one show in Westwego over there and then we are going to have in August, August eleventh and twelfth. In Westwego over there... then we are going to have Cajun Heritage right there in Larose. The next month. And September. And then October we are having another show in Houma. And this year, well, I usually have from five to 10 pieces. But this year, I have trouble with my hand... You can take pills, but that don't help. It wants to put me to sleep. It don't affect my carving. It effects my painting. I painted on that feather today. Practically all day long. But God, though, I am all discouraged what happened. I don't know why.

*So the judge, I mean, you'd have to show the original?*

Yeah. Yeah. The two feather got be put on a block, on a base, you know? It's not quite the color but I tell you what, it's only God that do that. I tried my best but it is very hard to paint, to match that color. If you turn it you are going to have more dark or more light. If you turn it some more it shines. Look. It is going to have some silver in there. You've got to put silver, gray, raw umber, burnt umber and you've got a bunch of color in tubes, you know? You mix it with water. But I'm telling you all day I painted. But I'm discouraged to see my feather like that. It was a perfect feather. See, I am going to get a perfect feather. I am going to do that. I

had some other feathers, you know? I pick up feathers. If I see a bird killed on the street or something I stop and I look. They got a feather that's not beat up or something. Pull out a feather. Put it in a pile in my room. But I'm disappointed there that the feather is in bad shape. I don't know what I am going to do. The hell with it. Can't do nothing no more.

*Something got to it. Weather or something.*

Yeah, the weather. I don't know what happened. Look at that. It is all broken up. All broken... and they are going to ask me, "Why did you take a feather that was all broken up?"

### 3. OIL AND OUTSIDERS COME TO GOLDEN MEADOW

Once The Texas Company had secured mineral rights to sizable chunks of private and state landholdings in south Louisiana, it started exploration in the late 1920's. Salt domes had been shown to be associated with hydrocarbons at Spindletop in Texas and in several locales on the prairies of southwestern Louisiana. So similar features near Leeville and Golden Meadow were probed. Oil was struck and the economy and society of south Lafourche Parish were transformed. The company's success in Lafourche was replicated in the other parishes of south Louisiana, from Plaquemines along the Mississippi River to Lafayette in the west. The entire region saw an influx of people and an infusion of capital in the 1930's. Texaco stood out because of the extensiveness of its holdings on land and on the water bottoms, but other companies were involved, such as Gulf, Shell, and, after World War II, The California Company, now Chevron. Independent wildcatters also came to the area. Some were successful, some not.

Locals collapsed distinctions and referred to the newcomers as *Texiens*, though they came from north Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and elsewhere, as well as from Texas. The outsiders were Protestant, English-speaking, and, at first, mostly young and single men. There was inevitable conflict. As adequate housing became more available, workers brought their families, and the prohibition on speaking French in school was reinforced by incoming teachers. But the outsiders soon realized the need for local expertise: *Texiens* themselves had little experience in the foreign environment of south Louisiana. Locals were hired to guide seismograph teams through the confusing marshes. Shrimpers, who knew how to operate in the brown water of the coastal zone and the blue water of open bays, were recruited to ferry men, fresh water, and supplies to the rigs and drilling barges. And Cajuns, with mechanical aptitudes honed on farms and boats, were hired to build, tear down, and relocate drilling rigs and derricks.

Some fortunate homeowners derived rents and royalties from the companies lifting oil from under their properties. Others, some illiterate, many cash-poor during the Depression, forfeited their lands to unscrupulous landsmen or because of an inability to pay taxes. Others had to move up the bayou when an uncontrolled blowout in Golden Meadow ruined domestic water supplies collected in cisterns and destroyed the soils of garden plots. The inhabitants complained, but in the absence of local government and in the face of powerful oil companies, they could only complain to each other.

With time, tensions eased, and a number of *Texien* men married local women and became assimilated to Cajun culture and society, more or less. Modest wealth began to be accumulated by local oil field workers, boat captains and crews, and shopkeepers who, before oil came, dealt mostly in bartered goods, not cash. Through the 1940's, locals kept learning the oil field jobs of the *Texiens*, and acquired positions of responsibility as toolpushers in charge of drilling rigs, gaugers who measured out the oil going into storage in the tank batteries. Some became field foremen and supply-base supervisors. What made south Lafourche stand out among other coastal Louisiana settlements was the cumulative maritime expertise. As oil exploration and production moved offshore beginning in the late 1940's and more and bigger boats were needed, fortunes were made in the construction and operation of oil field vessels.

### 3.1. Pershing and Ophelia Lefort (March 5, 2002; Larose, LA)

*Born in Golden Meadow in 1924, Pershing J. Lefort was a life-long Texas Company man, working in production at several of the company's fields run by the Harvey and Houma districts. He served in the Army in the Pacific during World War II, took advantage of the GI Bill to get a degree from Lafayette, then after additional service in the Air Force and several years working on drilling rigs, got on with Texaco. His last job was to develop an experimental tertiary recovery process using CO<sub>2</sub> at the Paradis field. His wife Ophelia is an accomplished artist, painting local scenes on materials such as oyster shells and muskrat-skin drying boards.*

*Although Pershing did not begin his career with Texaco until 1952, he had quite vivid memories of the arrival of the company in the 1930's. As a child, he would play on the land rigs, try to avoid the quicksand of the open mud pits, and trap and fish with his father amidst the exploratory dynamite holes in the marsh. Pershing's father had to move house and family up the bayou to Galliano after a Texaco well blew out in the late 1930's. Pershing recalled the mess, and the abrupt cessation of family vegetable gardens in the ruined soil. But he and Ophelia agree that the industry had positive impacts on the communities of lower Lafourche. Folks began to see some money, and the burden on children to supplement meager family earnings was reduced. For Pershing and others, this enabled them to remain in school.*

Pershing: Okay, my name is Pershing J. Lefort. I was born in 1924 and so I was five years old when the stock market dropped overnight and then the Depression years beginning from that point... In 1934, I was ten years old. And oil researchers had developed, had discovered shallow oil deposits in the Golden Meadow area and therefore many small companies brought land drilling equipment and started to develop the field in the early '30's. By the time I was 10 years old they had a few wells drilled and I took a lot of interest in the type of work these men were doing and of course these men were mostly men that came from west Texas with some knowledge of drilling and road building and stuff of that nature. And so I took a lot of interest in the type of work they were doing. And as I grew up more developed like they did. I was completely surrounded by little drilling rigs. They was small rigs and the wells they were drilling were shallow. All free flowing wells. And these men being working people away from home having kids probably my age, some. They were good boys. They'd bring us on the rigs and then some time my mother would make a pot of coffee and I'd bring it down and put a pot of coffee on the rig. I'd even sit with the driller and put my hand on the brakes just for the fun. In those days there was no safety practice done and, you know, anything went. So I got to feel the rig and watch those drillers when I was quite young. My parents leased their property to a company named Brown and Root and they drilled an oil well right off the house in the back and another one later right in front of the house which was the biggest mess. I remember it being a big mess but I had fun being on these rigs with these men. It was the biggest mess because in those days there was no regulation for drilling mud control or venting on gas. You just brought the oil in, put it in the small storage tank, five hundred or less barrels and no pipeline. The well would only be open a few hours before he'd fill the tank, then had to wait for a barge. The only way of transporting oil out of east Golden Meadow and west Golden Meadow as well was by barging, using Bayou Lafourche. That's what we had to use, Bayou Lafourche, to cross to go to school. We didn't have no school, no stores; we didn't have nothing. We lived in the marsh. So it was quite an exciting life when I look back. I had a real ball. Then it got so bad; Texaco had a

well that blew out on the west side of Golden Meadow. The dome over this large salt dome that our field is on has salt and sulfur. Therefore that gas is very toxic but it didn't matter. They just vented it through pipes and ventilated and it burned. There was no way to handle gas and the companies had no interest in gas. It was the heavy crude they wanted to be able to sell to refineries.

That's the way it was in the growing stage of it all. Texaco was established mostly far as I know all west at that time of Bayou Lafourche and Texaco developed quite a field there in the Golden Meadow area and also in Leeville, both sides of the bayou. Going back, Texaco's blew out from under control. It sprayed all salt water, it was mostly salt water. After the oil was flushed out there was salt water behind it and sulfur. In those days all the roofs were like tin roofs, galvanized tin roofs. The sulfur would eat through the roof and the salt would make the biggest mess. No vegetation could possibly survive. It was like living in a desert or something. Everything was dead, everything ... lucky we even survived. But my daddy could not see his family there anymore. He saw where it would be best to move up the bayou and away from all this and he had [income] for using oil on his property. And so he was not rich but could afford to buy property and did. And this was a big house. It took two boys to put that on a barge and move to Galliano and it took a week, just that short distance. And the porch all around had to be removed for the barge or it would break off. The house had to be moved without the added addition. Okay, so we moved to Galliano. By then I was fourteen years old and I was looking at just going to school and getting a job on the rig. This is all I knew in the way of work.

It was slow going in Golden Meadow. Now I can tell you this about the early wells in Golden Meadow. It was slow going in this sense. Drilling a well was no problem, very shallow and it produces it with no other help but the pressure from the ground and we didn't have the storage. You'd open a well two or three hours, you fill up the tank and then you have to shut the well in. Now you can't open that well again till a barge comes and that's got to be pumped from the tank to the barge in the bayou. There's no pipeline.

After that you can open up your well and fill it up. Before the barge, before the tugboat with the barge could even leave the dock you had already opened your well and filled the next tank for the next trip. It wasn't a fast thing. Then they built some short pipeline and then finally...

Ophelia: What year was that?

Pershing: Early '30's. 1930 on. The first well might have been drilled by 1932 or something. It was the very early '30's. I was just a boy then. I was raised by my daddy, I know, but I can't remember any activity before that. There must have been some but before they could even put a rig on a piece of property first of all they had to pay a lease, which wasn't no big money. You know, probably three or four hundred dollars for a lease. But you had to do some exploration. Now I remember this: when I was a small boy and my dad, after work or on the weekends or something he'd like to trap, he'd like to fuss with the trap line. We go in the back and we had these big holes in the marsh, big holes, those were dynamite holes. So after this dynamite thing happened before I was born or I was just a baby, I don't know when, you know, they were there. Nobody would tell you those were dynamite holes. In the lake, good fresh fish in there you know; perch and everything you wanted, and muskrats and minks. And we learned that very

young. So I know the exploration started way before my time. But when the drilling started I was like six.

Ophelia: Now when they did that, they were looking for oil, when they used dynamite?

Pershing: Yeah, the seismographing in those days, they shoot dynamite but it was so shallow that they had an instrument to record the sound back.

*So when these wells were pumping into the barge did you have to have someone attending each of the wells?*

Pershing: Yeah, definitely, yeah you had to have an employee. They call 'em pump tenders or something like that... In those days you didn't have no big crew of people and you barely had tugboats. The barge was just the barge. The tugboat...the crew that was on the tugboat and you'd pull...tow the barge. Then the technology, they got those tugboats built a little stronger so they'd be better to where they started using push tugs that would push the barges which gave better control. When you've got a barge on tow that thing can swing in any direction and wreck all kinds of stuff that you've got on the bank. But towing you see is different, I mean in pushing. Well, this developed pretty well but at the same time they were connecting pipeline to smaller tanks to larger vessels and so forth. These storage pipelines were part of Texaco -- big, big storage. And so we'd pump our oil...we'd pump some into different... We had oil in Leeville in different grades. They'd have to be put into the same pipeline at different times with the right...you knew by the amount you put in, how much you receive. All this was done by radio...they had radio contact... And we had a radio in the production office. In other words we had direct radio contact with the pipeline all the time, and in the field as well we had a pipeline radio and in the boats. You always needed a pipeline; you always needed the pipeline people. When that was displaced you put the other grade behind it...but that was the way it would be done. And they'd make the separation to those big storage tanks of those different grades, you know. That entered the pipeline to pump to the refinery. Moving the oil was quite a problem and quite a development here. Drilling a well with...you can drill a lot more wells than you can move the oil. It was like that in every field, you know, east Texas, all these fields. You know they've done it all and the oil would come gushing out. And when you hit oil in those days you didn't have the blowout preventers and the stuff you have today. All you've got is a big bunch of oil going to the top of the derrick. You don't want to be caught up in a derrick at that time either. Oh that was a messy place. First of all there was no control on pollution. Nah, what killed most vegetation and well there got to be a lot of people sick. I don't know how we survived but we did. It was the salt water and sulfur and chemicals from drilling and that was dangerous. We knew not to get near those pits. Drilling mud is like quicksand. You get in...a kid gets into drilling mud and the pit is deeper than the kid. He's going to be sucked...he's going to go down. I mean it's like quicksand. And when it does dry up it's cake. It dries up like a thick crud with all types of cracks in it. I've been around these things all my life. I was a kid running around these pits.

*Did the parents try to warn all the kids to stay away from this stuff?*

Pershing: Well yes, but we were kids. In those days you didn't have [the] control you have today. I mean we did what we please. You know we were very mischievous anyway too. You know in those days we didn't have no electricity, no running water, no gas. We had to depend on rain in the cisterns. We had to heat that big ole house -- a lot of it as big as this one and cold. This is hard enough to heat with the central unit. We heated that with a wood stove. How about being so cold I thought everyone in the world was cold like that. I thought that was it, that's the way we lived. We didn't know any better. We didn't know enough to know we were cold. Same thing with the Eskimos in the igloos. They don't know they're cold. I mean you're born cold and you die cold. It's a tribal thing you know. And we had some harsh winters in those days. We didn't have these mild winters we're having now. Sometimes things would ice up these cisterns for a week or two.

Ophelia: The year our oldest son was born had icicles on the roof.

Pershing: Our oldest son is 56. Food was a problem at times. That was always seasonal. In the garden growing season -- spring and early summer -- beaucoup vegetables. You did without the rest of the year and you had no vegetables in the wintertime. Of course they aren't really making gardens anymore. I mean the oil field came in and that was end of that. There was no way you could grow nothing. But during the time before the oil field made that big mess I used to go play in that garden when I was a little kid. All the food you want -- big gardens. These parents of ours and grandparent and the generation back, they worked from sun up to sun down. There was no letup. These were large families. And none of those three or four kids per families, these were eight, nine, ten. I mean us, we was only six but I was a small family with six. My uncle, they had 11...yeah but he wasn't all that big either.

Ophelia: His grandfather fathered 21 kids.

Pershing: That's right. I've got seven uncles and aunts younger than me. I mean not only was the mother always pregnant, the kids were always pregnant too. You ended up with...she had seven children after I was born. Isn't that something? And it was all together. She had...she raised...she gave birth to... it was only three. And she gave birth eighteen or nineteen. She had four or five twins. But then she lost two. She was always pregnant. She was her whole life. In a family that size the younger...the older ones got to provide for the younger. The younger one can never get a fresh suit of clothes. It's got to be handed down. Patches over patches over patches. They had to go down the line. You could only afford to buy so much clothes and it had to go to the one who needed it the most. The guy who was growing out of his clothes -- because nothing is lost here -- his clothes goes to the next one. When you're having children and you're poor like that... she had two pair of twins but only two survived. In other words four out of the eight, two of them died at birth. In those days those odds are nothing. I mean giving birth to that many children with no doctors.

Ophelia: Well, the oil field, I believe the oil field made Golden Meadow prosperous.

Pershing: That's right. It was a good thing for Golden Meadow. I mean that...we would have stayed poor forever. I could have never stayed in school. Very few people stayed in school. You were ten, eleven years old, you couldn't stay in school anymore. You had to be out there working. If it's nothing more than chopping wood and hauling that stuff, I mean you didn't have no equipment to work, no nothing like that and you had to have fuel. You had to have enough to cook on the wood stove and we had a lid on it no bigger than this, a little tiny stove made out of tin can. It was called a...it was a kerosene stove. And it'd cook and it would drip with a control valve. It would control everything, but two burners. And it would try to feed us, there was eleven of us at the table, six kids and three adults. Everybody did very, very good.

When I graduated the war broke out. World War II broke out when the Japanese attacked. I was in the tenth grade and the draft is then twenty-one. In 1943, we were in all-out war with both European and Pacific theaters and us boys as seniors were reaching eighteen and therefore the government saw where you could get a lot of young manpower by dropping the age. They needed the personnel because of planning invasions and so forth. So here I am graduating out of high school and right into World War II. I was drafted into the Army and spent three years in the Pacific including the occupation of Japan after the war. I came home still interested in the oil field. However, since I had four years of college education coming to me from the GI Bill I chose to go to school and I did that for four years. I liked oil field and I liked the military too so meanwhile I decided after the new Air Force was just forming in 1947, in 1948 I was, during my sophomore year, I decided to join the R.O.T.C. They accepted me in the advanced program because of my previous military experience and I went through the two full years and got commissioned as second lieutenant in the United States Air Force in 1950. Here I am caught in the Korean War. But I didn't have to go to Korea but I was always ready reserves, standby reserve, nobody wants to give me a job here, you know, being subject to call any time. You know, I'm a reserve, I've got a commission. But fortunately, they had enough graduates to...I missed the call. Oh no, they didn't forget about me. They kept putting me standby reserve, ready reserve and this and that, but I stayed in the reserves till I was 38 years old. By then I was a first lieutenant. I had to do something, go in or find enough time to be a captain which I didn't have enough time. I was in the oil field by then. So they had to put me in the retired division; it's not like they discharged me from the Air Force. I had an indefinite commission and I'm a retired reserve for life.

In 1952 I had decided now that I have a family, two young children and a wife, I decided the military was not for me. It wasn't good for my family. It was best I go in the oil field, not that I have a great knowledge about working in the oil field but I had seen others work all during my life. Went to work for Gulf Oil Company but this was a pipeline company at the end of a river and I worked there for a year on a very large project -- big pipeline from Bay Marchand all the way to Ostrica terminal. It was across the river from Buras. It was a tremendous big project.

Here I am with a young family, the kids not yet in school. But one of them did start school when I was in Buras, first-grader. I wore out a car just going back and forth on these dirt roads going to the job. Had many trips to make all over. Came all the way to Marchand many times and so I did a lot of traveling and I wore out a brand new car in a year. The roads were not even passable sometimes, deep ruts, very difficult. Decided I'd had enough of this pipeline work. I wanted to get into production work. I joined Dinsinger Drilling Company.

Right after he employed me as a roughneck they changed the company to Southern Production. The main office was in Baton Rouge. And then later on to Offshore Drilling. I believe Texaco, I'm sorry, Moses, did our drilling. Moses started production for Offshore Drilling because they had part interest in the company. We were assigned to a barge and I find out that barge, that drilling barge, was working in this area here and I wanted to settle down in Bayou Lafourche again, I decided I was going to work on that rig -- *Number Seven*, I'll never forget it. Rig *Number Seven* belonged to Southern Production and Texaco owned the barge and therefore that barge did not drill for anyone but Texaco. I spent three years working for Southern Production in those two fields, Golden Meadow and Leeville, Texaco fields. I got pretty familiar with the foremens and everything, the superintendents and everything that would come on the rig, Texaco people. I got pretty familiar and friendly with most and therefore they thought I had a good chance of getting a job at Texaco and leaving this rig work, going into production work for Texaco. I talk about when I came on they hired me as a roughneck because that's the only experience I've had so far. So they hired me on the spot, the minute I walked into the office I was hired and they wanted me to work the next morning. I hadn't taken the physical yet, I had to take the physical after work in the afternoon, because they need me on the rig. They were shorthanded. The rig was drilling in Leeville, a Texaco rig. I'm with Texaco now and it was a steam rig. Boy oh boy. They had power rigs, but I was on a steam rig. The worst weather conditions, nothing short of a blizzard that day, it was the worst day of my life that I ever worked, you know, freezing rain. But laying down singles coming out the hole there was no stopping, the work has to go on, no break. And it takes long to come out the single when you are working with a three strain pipe. Every pipe has to be broken into singles and laid down. I survived this and I worked the rest of the week, which was just as hard, but I didn't like the work much, the steam rigs. I wanted to work on one of the power rigs. But I went to the office and told them how I felt about this. They said, "Well, we'll put you on the power rig but you have to work on the lakes and we need you. If you want to do it we'll put you on just a drilling rig, no workovers, but not always on the same rig, you're going to be a floating roughneck. You've got to be able to work derricks, motorman, you've got to have this knowledge." No problem for me. I didn't have to work 6 and 6 like the rest of the crew, it was 9 and 3 and I needed the money. I'd work that rig for the six days, somebody would be shorthanded on the next rig, sometime I'd have to leave Caillou Island to go to Dog Lake, whichever it was. I had to go fill in for three days and somebody else would come in behind me and fill in the other three days and keep on our regular 6 and 6 schedule but always 9 and 3 -- making three extra days for the men that didn't show up to work on a certain rig. Texaco had a lot of working rigs in those days so that they was always short, always short of roughnecks, especially if they needed experienced roughnecks. They were hiring non-experienced people but they had to be trained and they wouldn't pass up a good roughneck that's got experience.

*Was there a lot of people working nine and three or were you kind of unique?*

Pershing: I don't remember the exact number, about ten. You could go anywhere. I had ended up, let's see, several places. I'd have to go to Grand Isle to catch the boat and go along the river and all that. From Grand Isle, and of course Golden Meadow and Leeville. But there was so much drilling in the lakes that I spent a lot of time on the lakes. But not for long, I didn't do this very long because they knew and I told them and I kept reminding them that my interest is to one

day get off of these rigs. I didn't want to make a career on a rig. I want to go into production work. So after seven months they sent me to Leeville to work in production. And I stayed with production twenty-nine and a half years.

Another thing happened during my time with Texaco. Of course we older people make the company, it was The Texas Company. It was not Texaco then. And I didn't like the idea of changing to Texaco Incorporated because I liked The Texas Company. I knew The Texas Company since I was a little boy. Men talked about The Texas Company. I like the sound of it or something. So anyhow this took place of course. They changed their name to Texaco, Inc. But that didn't change much. I was working out of the Houma District. My last...my second to last assignment with Texaco was the Valentine Field which was gas, mostly gas wells. I stayed in the Valentine Field a year or so, a couple of years, three years, I don't remember. Meanwhile, while I was at Valentine, still in the Houma District, they had transferred me to do the administration work. They took Valentine out of the Houma District and put it into the Harvey District.

Then the Valentine field was played out. Texaco was changing things around so fast and whatever. I was sent to Paradis, which is in the Harvey District. There's a lot of interesting work in Paradis because they was going into a new process of tertiary recovery, injecting C-O-2 instead of the water. You know salt water... wells pumped gas instead of water. Tertiary recovery was a new project being tested right there in Paradis. And I retired on that job...

*Was that a successful process? Did it test out okay...the injecting of C-O-2?*

Pershing: Oh, yeah. First of all, all the injections wells had to be drilled, a separate well. You didn't go through the same well. So that was one operation. They laid the pipeline from the gas plant in Boutte to furnish the C-O-2 that had to be piped to Paradis. In Paradis they had a little plant which added nitrogen taken out of the atmosphere. This is injected into the well. We had several compressors and we injected C-O-2 for a period of time and then engineers would come and test this and do this and do that before they could produce any well. Wells of that type, they weren't producing anywhere anymore, you know. You have to give the C-O-2 time to push the oil through the formation to the producing wells by going in and out of these materials or going in and out of these wells. There came a time when they were ready to start flowing some. They'd experimentally open one and everything went beautiful like it was planned and then more and more and when I retired it was still in the growing stage when I retired, you know.

*This tertiary recovery is on wells that had been producing this for a while and then they are trying to rework them?*

Pershing: Yes, right. Well, yeah we couldn't use them anymore. The oil wouldn't get to the well enough to make it a profitable operation anymore. I mean they had exhausted the oil. So they planned a way to do it and this was done in other places, tested before and down here we was testing it, it was experimental stuff. How long will it work? How long will it last? I've been retired fifteen years. I think it's still producing some and I'm not sure. But anyhow I did see oil being produced out of the ground in tertiary recovery before I retired.

Then I got too old to go on. I wish I could have put in another thirty years. I didn't want to retire really, you know. I had raised my family and Texaco had never failed to put food on my table and the least I could do was give 'em a good day's work for good pay. Unlike some companies I don't think Texaco ever had a layoff. A general layoff. Well, the other companies did several times, companies, major companies. You knew you had a secure job, and that made my job more likeable knowing that you've got a secure job; makes you want to work more, you don't mind working more. You have a job that you think might fail and there's all kinds of rumors going on that they're going lay off this and lay off that. You've got that in the industry -- the oil industry. A person cannot take much pride and pleasure in his work when you don't feel the security. I always felt the security with Texaco, always felt secure. And they did a good job of providing me with what I need to raise a family of four -- four college graduates. It took money to do this. I did it but I had a source and that was Texaco. And I spent most of my time at home, not away from home, except the few times I worked with the rigs on the lakes. Now I mean most of the time it was Golden Meadow, Leeville and then I moved here to Larose thirty years ago and of course Valentine was just a short driving distance -- a ten minute ride from here. And then I had to go out offshore and stuff like, which I had the opportunity to do. Now they needed people like us offshore but nobody wanted to go. However, the pay was higher but so was the sacrifice. You leave your family for offshore 7 and 7 or 14 and 7 is what we used to work in those days, after a while you don't like your job anymore. You'd rather be home, you know. So I was fortunate enough to see my family raised, saw it through that they had a good education. As long as I did my share to prepare them for any challenge.

*Did your children get into the oil business?*

Pershing: I've only got two boys...both didn't like the idea of getting dirty for work. They'd rather go into the field of education and wear a suit to school and... But however, my oldest son worked during the summer in the oil field and he was a very skillful roughneck and worked derricks, but he went back to school, come back the next summer...he always had a job in the summer roughnecking while he was in college. That gave him the incentive to finish college and not go on those rigs anymore. He was going to work for the money but he didn't want to make a career out of working on rigs and stuff. And he's been a schoolteacher ever since. Both my daughters are schoolteachers and even one of my daughters worked on a boat in the summer time. A cook. My brother was the captain and that was his niece and he needed a crew member so he wanted me to hire mine to go over there and cook our meals -- a girl -- and my daughter needed a job so he said, "I'll take care of her well, nobody's going to molest her or nothing like that," and he did. Now he's a captain of his niece, you see? Well, she enjoyed it. However, occasionally she had to step on deck and clean up. She enjoyed it. And while I was in Paradis our youngest son lived in Paradis. I had him working in summers for a contractor, which was working for Texaco. Lots of times I'd work with those contractors myself with a project, depending on what assignment I'd get. And I got to know him pretty well. I mean, you know, they was like us. They was always the same contractors all the time. They didn't change contractors in Paradis like most people do, like every week a different set. This is a crew that worked there for years but they were contractors, they was not Texaco employees. And Texaco wasn't hiring nobody in the summertime and here I was going to work the Paradis. "Why not come to work and work in that gang there that would look after you?" And I did, I looked after them, you know.

There were two crews, one in Paradis and one in ...I can't think of the name of it. He's just a five-man crew, a crew leader and four hands. The reason they were always working Paradis is all of them came -- they were all related, they all came from the area there, in the same area, close. They lived there. And they worked well and Texaco could trust them and they didn't have to be...nobody had to be looking behind them all the time, you know. You get something to be assigned to them and you hardly needed anybody to check because you knew it was going to get done. And it was a good, dependable crew. Well that was the end of my career with Texaco. However, I've experienced a lot of stuff. [I retired in] 1984. I was fifty-nine and a half.

### **3.2. Pep and Bertha Williams (September 21, 2001; Galliano, LA)**

*Mr. Andrew "Pep" Williams is an "oldtimer." When I arrived for the interview, Pep and his wife Bertha were sitting around their back patio, and he was doing some watering. Their well-kept house in Galliano has many visible patriotic displays, and Bertha dwelled on the imminent Afganistan war and the hardships it would pose for south Louisiana boys who might be called upon to fight in mountainous terrain. Pep, 88, started with Texaco in 1945; his wife, 84, was a Mardi Gras parade queen a few years ago. Pep started as a roughneck, worked up to a driller, then spent the last of his 33 years with Texaco as a "driller and production foreman," essentially the company man supervising operations on several fields around south Louisiana. He worked another year as a consultant for \$500 a day. As a company, Texaco was "like a family." Unlike other companies who had their own rigs and brought them, with their own crews, to south Louisiana, Texaco hired locally. Pep and his wife were both originally from Golden Meadow. She was raised in a house that had washed up in a storm from Leeville and was purchased and rebuilt by her father on the site of the present fire station in Golden Meadow.*

*Before Pep got on with Texaco, he was trawling and trapping. "That's about all the work they had down here in Golden Meadow." He and Bertha recall the boom times when the "Texiens" arrived from outside. The schools weren't prepared to accommodate the influx of students, and there was a shortage of housing. Bertha, however, suggests that the lack of places to rent opened up job opportunities for local men: workers from the outside couldn't find accommodations for their families, so they left.*

Pep: I was born and raised here in Bayou Lafourche. Actually in Golden Meadows. We had one church in them times, we had to go to Larose, that's where I was baptized. 'Cause it was the nearest church we had. Of course, now that there's one in Larose, Golden Meadow, Galliano. But we moved from Golden Meadow up here to Galliano. 'Bout 30 years ago. Wanted to do a little expansion on our home and we didn't have enough space in Golden Meadow so we moved here in Galliano, where we had more acreage here. We had five children and we needed a little more room.

*And at the time you moved up, was the oil going big in Golden Meadow?*

Pep: It was. We had a blowout and then Bennett was drilling in the town of Golden Meadow and one of the oil wells blew up and we had oil all over. That was a mess. Nowadays, they'd capped it right away, you know. But in them days they didn't have the facilities that they have

nowadays. So they let it blow out until it really blows up on itself. It was just spraying oil and salt water. All the fences got rusted and everything was a mess.

Bertha: And it was right in our neighbors-, in our backyard. Oh, our house. Our clothes, we didn't have no dryer those days. You had to hang your clothes or you couldn't, you had to have clothes lying over your house.

Pep: But you know, we didn't have what you have today, but we didn't miss it. 'Cause we didn't know better. We didn't know they had what they got now, air conditioning and what not. We had kerosene lamp, we didn't have no electricity when we first got married. Finally we got electricity. But all we had was one light bulb, for the lights. And we didn't have no other, a refrigerator, we had a refrigerator and light, that's about all we had. We had an iceman who would give us a block of ice and we'd put it in the bottom of the refrigerator. That would keep our food. No, we didn't have the refrigerator.

Bertha: We was about the first one that got the electricity and the icebox. Then we was, me and my sister, was the first one that had got a gas stove. It was one of those gas tanks outside.

Pep: Butane, yeah. We was the first one that had a telephone. We had about five houses that had telephones when they first started there. But, I don't know, you can say it was good old days when everybody got along. Not like that, nowadays, I mean, everybody wants what the other one has. It makes it rough.

*But how 'bout when the oil people started coming into Golden Meadow from outside, did that cause any problems?*

Bertha: It did. In ways that they couldn't find no renting place. He was working, and I used to, I had two bedrooms and I have a feather bed, that was what we called it. And it was in my kitchen. And I used to rent my, if it was a couple, I didn't mind a couple, I used to rent my two bedroom, and sleep on the floor with my children, so they could have a place, 'cause there was no place. There was no place at all. They didn't have no hotel even. And finally we got one, but there was more people comin' in. And they couldn't stay 'cause they couldn't find nothing to stay in.

Pep: Really, it was like we had been invaded, you know. Like when the boom came up, they needed lot of people. So all them people from Texas, because the local people didn't, was ignorant about the oil field. And Texas had it, they knew what to do with it. So they had all strangers. Finally, the local people, as you went along, and they took over. But when it first started, it was just... we used to call 'em *Texiens*.

Bertha: Even if you were from Cut Off or Thibodaux, you were a *Texien* as long as...

Pep: If you was not from Golden Meadow, they used to call them *Texiens*.

Bertha: But it was rough for those people was coming in and didn't know where to find a room with their children. And then, it was hard for them if they were gonna go to work. If they was

coming with a little bit money and if they couldn't find the work, they had to leave. But they couldn't find even a place to rent. It was families, lot of families, lot of families. We went through lot of families.

Pep: You know, the man would come by himself and then later on if they get a job, then they would bring their family, if they could find something to rent.

Bertha: There was nothing. I mean, nobody was prepared for it. You was lucky enough to have a home. The school was not ready for that kind of... It was really hard. Really hard on the school and really hard on the parents, 'cause you had to try to help the school so they could provide for those kids that was comin' in. And worst of all, it was our kids, like me and him, not him, he learned how to speak English real young. But all the other kids was French, talking in French. And the other kids that was comin' in, it was all English. But everybody got along. We did the best we could. And it was really nice, I mean. But it was hard. It was hard on the kids that was comin' in and it was hard on the kids that was there, because it made a room crowded. You have more kids, and it was really, really hard on them. And the teachers. You couldn't speak French.

Pep: It wasn't allowed to talk French in school. They would punish you if they caught you speakin' French.

Bertha: And then the way my teacher taught us, she'd have, okay, it'd be fruits. Say we gonna have fruits tomorrow. Well, she'd have a fruit that showed us how we said it in French and how she pronounced it in English. And that's the way we did learn. If it was an apple, well we knew it was an apple. But before, when we first start school, we didn't know what was an apple. We knew in French, but we didn't know in English. That's how we learned. We had outside teachers. There was no local teachers at all. And as it went on, our kids finish school and went to, even some of them didn't finish school and was teaching. 'Cause they was so short of teachers. But it was the outside teacher that came from Thibodaux, New Orleans, Lafayette. See, there they had high school and ours was in Larose.

Pep: Well, when I finished school, I was promoted to eight. But the closest high school was eight miles and I couldn't afford to go, so I had to go to work. I would have liked to go to high school, but I was not able to because I was too poor. And it was only eight miles. You didn't got no transportation like they got nowadays. I mean, you didn't have no automobile. A few of them went, yeah.

Bertha: Finally, they grew up and everybody's going if they want to go and they have ways to go to college in Thibodaux and they're spread all over. It's nice. Now down here we have doctors that come from down here, we have lawyers that come from down here from that school. They went somewhere else after they finished at South Lafourche. In our days, you didn't have, well, you couldn't go nowhere. I mean, you had to stay to that little school that you had. How big a school it was when you went to school?

Pep: It had four rooms. But they would teach, the last year they had sixth, seventh, and eighth in one room. That was Mr. McCabe -- we used to call him -- and there was Chouest. And we had two and three classes in that one room. Nowadays, you got two or three teachers, maybe more.

*But was there a road down to Leeville at that time?*

Pep: No, it was down to the end of, where the end of the corporation (Golden Meadow) is now. That was the end of the road. And then later years they made a road up to Leeville. And then they made it up to Grand Island. You had to go in boats. You want to go to Grand Isle, you had to go out on a boat.

Bertha: Everybody made a living, I mean.

Pep: Well, you know it would be hard to go back to them days. But in them days, you didn't notice. Because you didn't know better. You didn't know what you was missing. Them young people couldn't take it, because they never had something like that. We used to go trawling and trapping. It was all you could. That's about all the work they had down here in Golden Meadow, was either fishermen and trapping. And I finally got an application to work for Texaco. And then I was accepted -- that was in '45 that I went to work. And I worked 23 years for Texaco. That was a good company to work for. It was like a family. 'Course when the engineers started, it was a little different. Because Texaco was kinda, you could call it, not cheap, but they was lookin' at that penny, I mean, they was kinda tight with their money. Only when the engineers came up, well they could spend what they wanted, as long as it was an engineer, whatever they recommend, they had it. I started roughneck, and then after a few years went to drilling, and then after that I was a superintendent the last ten years I worked for Texaco. And we enjoyed it, we enjoyed working.

I started in Golden Meadow, then I went to Leeville. I went to Caillou Island, Lake Pelto... I went all through them Texaco leases. Because as a supervisor you had to go from one field to the other, you know. I was a driller. For a few years, I roughnecked and then I was a driller and then I went to the superintendent. I had to go from one field to the other. When I'd go to one field, I'd take care of that one field. And I'd go to the next field, well that one field. I wouldn't bother the other field. One at a time. You have to look over just one field. I was what you called a driller and production foreman. As a driller and production foreman, you had to go from one rig to the other and supervise. Tell 'em what they had to do. And watch what they doing. Really, on the rig, you had to stay on the rig and see that they done the right thing. Because we had just a few company rigs. We had mostly contractors. And the contractors didn't know exactly what Texaco was working. So that's why they had to have one man on that particular rig all the time, to see that they do the right thing. They had different contractors, they had all kinds. They had Bay Drilling Company, that was a company from out of Houma, 2R (Reeves and Rebstock), they're from Houma, too. Texaco had a few [rigs]. But they had more work than their rigs could take care of. So that's why they had to hire contractors, too. But they had their own rigs. They had about four big drilling rigs. Most everybody from Houma and Golden Meadow would work for Texaco. Majority of the people worked for Texaco. Now, they had other companies, but it's not as many as Texaco.

Bertha: And the other companies was coming with their workers, with their own workers. That's why it made it hard for them to get a job. When their company would come with their rig, they would come with their workers, 'cause they had them working some other place. And it made the people, the local people, hard to get a job on those rigs. But when Texaco started, they started with only the local people. That's why he was able... 'cause only local men was on that rig. It was hard to get a job with the oil field. 'Cause like I said, they was coming from another field, and they was coming down, and they was bringing their own workers. The whole crews and all. The only way you could get a position to work if they couldn't have nothing to rent, they had to leave. And they couldn't bring their family, 'cause there was no place for them to stay.

Pep: When we started working on the rig for Texaco, we had three crews. We had one crew working days, would work 12 days and off four. And we had one relief crew, would relieve when we would go off, their crew would go off, well the relief crew would take over. So they would move from one place to the other. That's how it would work. And then after that we started working 6 and 6. And then when I went pushing, we go to 7 and 7. That's how it would wind up. Up to still today, that's the way they're working. When they go offshore, well, they work 14 and 14. That makes it less flying. That's the reason they do that. But on the land job they still work 7 and 7.

*What kind of changes in technology did you see during the course of your career, in terms of drilling and production?*

Pep: They had a lot of improvements in technology, the equipment, the tools, they have better tools to work with. And it was more convenient and you could get more work out of it, really. We had slips you'd go around the rotary. You run that pipe, you had to handle it. And then later on, they came out with them air slips. You wouldn't touch it, only the operator -- when the operator went to set the slip, went to release. When you was running the pipe in the hole, or pulling it out of the hole, you can use an air slip. It was a real help for the roughneck. You didn't have to raise a slip. It was heavy to raise, to pull up and set, to grab the pipe when they had to make a connection, you know. When they came out with the air slip and also they had air tongs that came out. Before you had to break the pipe by hand, to change it. Then when they came with the air tongs, all they got to do is put it on the pipe and press the button. It would make up the pipe, come out of the hole. It would do the reverse it and break the pipe. Just press the button and it would break up the pipe. You didn't have to do it by hand. That started, let me see, I worked in '45. I'd say that came out in about '55, when they start having the air slips and the air tongs. That was a real relief for the roughnecks, yeah. It was a big relief.

*Did you see a real progression or a need to change the technology when it went [into the marshes]? Or was it just kind of an evolution of development of the technology?*

Pep: No, it really stayed the same. It didn't have much improvement to the way they was doing it. When they first started doing it, like the same technology and doing the same thing. They'd go in the marsh, they could log the location, if it was in a marsh. But then they'd cut a canal, to float that rig to the location. We would center the rig, rig the well in, set the Christmas tree on, and then we'd move off. And then another crew would come and build construction around the

rig for protection. But that's another crew that would take care of that. We would stay with the rig. We wouldn't work on that construction there. When the well is coming in, they got pumpers, what they call 'em. Gaugers that goes around and see that everything is all right. Sometimes they got to change the choke, to allow the oil... different choke. If it make sand, well they had to cut it down, something like that. And get the reading. Every morning they would report how much that well make. They, during that 24 hours, they would take a gauge, what you call it, and see how much it would take in 24 hours. The pumper would take care of that. He works by himself. He goes around from one rig to the other, one well to the other. He had to go in a boat.

*Were the wells all tied in to a pipeline?*

Pep: They're all tied in to a pipeline, yeah. Now at Caillou Island, they had walks. They could go walk on the walks. They had a walk built around, and then the pumpers could walk on that walkway and check their wells.

*Did Texaco at that time have a central refinery or a collection point for all their wells?*

Pep: Yeah, they had refinery in Texas. When they first started in Caillou Island, they had a ship. They would load that ship and barges and bring that oil to the refinery. But nowadays, it all goes by pipeline. You don't have that, the barges like they used to have to move their oil. It's all moved on the pipeline now.

*Did Texaco get involved in the offshore?*

Pep: Not right away. Texaco was in the bays. They was kind of watching, they was kind of tight on their money. Maybe that's the reason they was afraid to invest too much. But lately, like I said, after the engineers started going on, well that was a little different. Maybe that's when they started, when they start having engineers lookin' after their work. Then that's when they started expanding, really. And spending more money. Well, they was used to what they was doing, yeah. Stayin' in the bay, the inland waters. They was satisfied with that.

Bertha: Like many other things, they didn't have the experienced men. They had all to learn. And when the experienced men came in, well, there they was, well, they know what they doing.

Pep: Everybody make mistakes.

*Was there a lot of uncertainty like you have now? You know, you have booms, slow downs.*

Pep: No, you didn't have that. What you had look like it stayed for years, the same. Was always the same, yeah. We was getting four dollars a barrel for oil in them days.

Bertha: Now we have a rent house. Now you can rent to the oil field. We rent one house 40 years. We was building that house and some of the men of the oil field knew about it. And the one big pusher was comin' in. And they say the Williams' building a house. And he came to our house and asked if he could rent it. Well, they was just putting the block on. "It should be

quite a while before you finish it up. But you go talk with my husband and the carpenter.” So he went and the carpenter saying, “Too much.” ‘Cause it was a plain house, it was no brick home or nothing. And he came back, and he say, “So how much it going to be?” “I think it was going to be 25 dollars.” “To make sure that I get that house, I’m gonna pay right now. I want that house, ‘cause I know I been all over and I can’t get none. And there’s no other house going up.” I rent it, and they laugh, and I said, “I rent the blocks.” And sure enough in two months he came and it’s rented. For 25 dollars.

Pep: But in them days, 25 dollars was good money. You could get something for a dollar. Nowadays you can’t get much for a dollar.

Bertha: We had two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bath.

Pep: A porch.

Bertha: We had the water and the lights and paint all over. We didn’t have the water, we had the cistern, a tank to put the water in.

Pep: No, we didn’t have no running water in them days.

Bertha: No, not in those days. So he was glad to get it. Like I said, we rented that house. One lady say, “Miss Bertha, how did you rent some block?” And I’ll explain her. Oh, she said, “Now I know.” ‘Cause you know that man want that house bad. And it was right in the middle of Golden Meadows. And it was right where his work was. And he was an inspector of the shrimp company.

Pep: In them days, they had to inspect the shrimp. When the boat would come up to the shrimp shed, they had to have an inspector to inspect the shrimp to be sure she was, she was in good shape, she wasn’t rotten or what not. They had to have an inspection.

Bertha: It was right in the middle, he could walk all over something. There was one, two, three factories. Shrimp factories. Ice factories.

*When did Golden Meadow become a town, a corporation?*

Bertha: It just celebrate 50 years, they just celebrate 50 years. We had three woman going house to house and see if you was gonna vote to have, be a town of Golden Meadow. They got it done.

*Was there any reason? Golden Meadow is one of the few corporations. Was there any reason Golden Meadow decided to become a corporation?*

Bertha: Well, I really think, the way she said, they was talking to us, the ladies. It was for us, if we incorporate we could get more from the law, and from the governor. To try to improve our town, improve our road, our schools. That’s why they was working for it, to have a corporation, that we could work, and whoever was going to be elected to be the mayor, he could work with the governor and they could get more to the school. It was mostly the school that was working to

bring more teachers and bigger classroom and things like that. That's why they was working really. And it was three ladies that had education. So they knew what they was working for. And Galliano didn't have those kind of people that wanted more education for their kids. That's how it started.

*So the incorporation was a partly a response to the oil activities, or no?*

Bertha: No, I don't believe. Just when the oil came in, well, that's when those ladies said, "Now we have to do something." People are coming in and we're not prepared for 'em. The school is not prepared for it. And if we could have it incorporated, then we could get help from the governor to help us out, build the school and build the roads, and like you say, open the door. That's how it all started. And the church, we got a bigger church. And everything improved.

*Were you involved in any big hurricanes or storms down in Golden Meadow? Was that a problem for you?*

Bertha: Every time they say storm you have to pack and leave. The worst part of the storm was -- we all had good houses that could stand the storm -- but you didn't know if somebody was gonna get hurt, and you would be stuck on this side of the Intracoastal. So you always tried to go past that Intracoastal, so you'd be on the other side in case something happen. But all our houses could stand the storm. We had people that leave their home and went to Cut Off. And they had a tornado, they got killed. And that house stayed. But it was just something that had to happen. Yeah, we went through a lot of storm, but we didn't stay at our house. We moved out. And that's the reason why. And we still do it. 'Cause of the Intracoastal that you have to cross. After you on the other side, well, you don't have to worry 'bout coming on this side. But it's this side, if you have to go for help that you can't go.

*When you retired from Texaco, did you get a pension or stocks or anything from the company?*

Pep: We had an opportunity to buy stocks... they offered us to invest. I didn't know nothing about stocks. So I bought, they was invested in bonds, war bonds. And then the stock split, they split three times. So then I change it, when I see what was happening. And I still have my stocks with Texaco. Now, they supposedly going with Chevron, it was a merge, supposedly Texaco and Chevron supposed to be merged. I don't know what's gonna happen. But it's supposed to come up pretty soon, next month, something like that. They're working on it. I invested in stock, yeah. And they pay a pretty good dividend. I mean, we get good returns from them. If I'da invested when they first started, it would be really very good, yeah.

Bertha: But you couldn't invest more than you could at that time. You didn't know nothing 'bout it.

Pep: No, we didn't know.

### 3.3. Dick Guidry (October 4, 2001; Galliano, LA)

*Dick Guidry was born in 1929 in south Lafourche, where his family was in the grocery business. His father and mother attempted to accommodate the influx of workers when the boom started in the 1930's by building rental houses. Dick himself, after finishing high school, embarked on a life-long career as an entrepreneur and politician. He became the youngest state legislator when he was elected in 1951 at age 21. He started up drilling companies, boat companies, and banks. He joined with Nolte Theriot to operate tugs in the North Sea in the 1970's. He admits candidly that he went broke on several occasions, but is still active in business ventures.*

*In a published account, Robert Guidry augments his brother's narrative of their parents' enterprises. John Leonce Guidry and Lillian Lefort Guidry opened a general merchandise store on the east side of the bayou in 1925. Over several decades, the couple became involved in an appliance and furniture store, a theater, a boarding house, 14 rental houses, additional rental cabins, an ice cream parlor and a saloon. John Guidry was also involved in the fur business, taking his floating merchandise boat on rounds to trappers' camps from Morgan City to Plaquemines Parish, receiving pelts in exchange for goods. For a short time, as well, he owned three houseboats. As Robert Guidry writes,*

*Any three fur trappers who agreed to sell his pelts exclusively to Mr. Guidry could borrow one of these floating houses for the duration of the trapping season. Mr. Guidry would tow the vessel himself to the area of the trapper's lease (Guidry 1996, page 151).*

*John Guidry died in 1952 at age 56. Lillian Guidry passed away in 1955, at age 57.*

My name is Dick Guidry. I live in Galliano and as far as I can remember we were in the grocery business, so everybody congregated around our place. We had a house with 17 bedrooms in it, and when the Leeville oil field boom started, approximately '32, I would say, early '30's, I was just a few years old, but then in '36 Lincoln Company drilled the first well, in Leeville on the Beauregard Vizier property. And then that started a boom. Texaco and Gulf. Gulf probably was the biggest for a while, and Texaco really got big after a while in the Leeville oil field. Then that expanded into the Golden Meadow oil field which started in about '36, and then that was primarily Texaco property. And then Bully Camp developed, which was Gulf Oil, then Superior Oil at Clovelley field in Galliano, and then it expanded into the Valentine field north of Larose, and then oil fields started popping up all over. Terrebonne Bay, Lake Racourci. Terrebonne Parish had some terrific gas wells, right in the city of Houma, actually.

But prior to all that all this was just a sleepy little fishing community with dirt roads on Highway 308, and a very poorly built gravel highway on Highway 1, and I don't think Highway 1 was paved until 1944. And after the oil fields inland were developed, well then Gulf Oil built the first offshore structure. I would say it was a great big long dock or wharf on pilings, about a thousand feet into the Gulf of Mexico. And they started drilling there until a hurricane blew the whole thing off. Blew the whole rig and everything off. Gulf abandoned the site, and Chevron picked it up and it became the Chevron field [Bay Marchand], which I believe produced over a billion barrels of oil. Back in the late '60's, they had already produced a billion barrels of oil.

And they're still producing oil there. Then, of course, the oil field really spread on the Continental Shelf, which is mostly gas, and then eventually it worked its way all the way from south Texas all the way to the Florida coast. And then recently, I'd say in the last four or five years, they started stepping out into the deep water, four to five thousand feet. And that's mostly oil. Tremendous reserves of oil. And gas, but mostly it's a lot heavier in oil than gas. The shelf is heavy on gas, and the deep water is heavy in oil. But prior to all this, it was a fishing community, with truck farming and shrimping, sugarcane farming, and people grew potatoes, onions, you name it, all small crops.

And then when the oil business started, well my father built 32 rent houses for the oil field workers, the transients that came in. As a matter of fact the roughnecks and toolpushers helped him drill a gas well on his property, 600 feet deep and produced enough methane gas to take care of 32 rent houses for over 40 years, supplied free gas, just marsh gas. And then when I graduated from high school in '47 I built movie theaters, and then when I was 29, I built my first drilling rig for Lafourche Drilling Company, and then a couple of years later, I built another drilling rig, the *Lake Workover*, and I worked primarily for Texaco and Bass Enterprises, which was Sid Richardson at the time. Independent, and mostly in Plaquemines Parish and Point a la Hache in Cox Bay. Stayed there for about... worked those rigs for Texaco and various oil companies for about 25 years. In '53 I started wildcatting in the state of Kentucky. And I produced 86 wells 600 feet deep. Made a lot of money. Lost it all in Michigan, drilling dry holes. Then I came back to Louisiana and expanded the drilling operations, and in the early '70's started building tugboats. I built a fleet of about nine tugboats and two barges, and then bought the Dilsaver Company out of Morgan City which had about 18 or 20 tugboats. I bought this company with Julian Fernandez as a partner.

*If we could go way back then to when your dad started the camp houses, what was the early interaction between these people coming in and the folks here. How many people were in favor and did things like build houses to accommodate them?*

Not too many. There were a few. The Marshland Hotel in Golden Meadow was built. The Marshland I guess had about 50 rooms, 60 rooms. Big building. The Marshland Hotel was built but many years after my dad had built those rent houses. You see, the transient people had to come in because the local Cajuns didn't know anything about the oil and gas business, and they had to learn. And once they learned, well then they pretty much took over the oil fields. They could do anything anybody else could do, and they actually were quite good at it. You take vice president of Texaco for many years, Jimmy Gibbens was from Mathews, he was born and raised on a plantation. He didn't know anything about oil. He became vice president of Texaco. Now, in the boarding house, some of the best known lived with us for years. John Mecom, for example, the guy who ran the Saints for several years, he was a toolpusher from Emerald Oil Company in those days. And then there was Howard Ramblin, who worked for four years as a roughneck for Texaco. He became chairman of the board for Texaco. When his wife Virginia died, he moved back to Houston, in the real estate business. He started out right here as a roughneck, working for Texaco. Well, he was from Waterproof, Louisiana. But when he was at LSU as a young engineer, he used to do... Texaco used to give summer jobs to students, to engineering students. So he started at the bottom as a roustabout, then a roughneck and so on, worked his way up. Jimmy Gibbens, the same thing, he started out as a roughneck, then became

a driller, then a toolpusher, then became vice president of Texaco. And John Mecom, well he started from the bottom in west Texas and became a toolpusher for Emerald Oil Company, an independent company, and then started drilling for himself and became a multimillionaire and was one of the richest people in America for years. He's the one that drilled the gas well for my dad, when he was a toolpusher for Emerald Oil Company.

In those days, you didn't need a permit to do anything. And in Leeville, they didn't need permits at the time that was started. And the Department of Conservation started later, I think in the Huey Long administration, that's when they robbed the state blind. Started giving water bottom overrides and... today you can't do that. They'd all be in the pen today. Of course most of them did finally go to the pen. Read the book *Louisiana Hay Ride* if you already haven't read it yet. It was written, I forget. I don't think T. Harry Williams wrote that one. Bob Masteri was Conservation Commission and everybody who voted for him, he gave them a piece of lake bottom... Terrebonne Bay or Lake Raccourci or...he gave to Harvey Peltier all the water bottoms of Leeville, after oil had been discovered and all, and he had a free ride with the water bottoms of the bayou. I guess wherever there's money, you'll find thieves.

*So, how long did your dad operate the camp?*

Oh...see...from 1922, he was in business till he built the boarding house in 1936. In 1922 he built the grocery store and bar and everything...he had a little community itself, he had a little theater, and that operated until he died in '58... I'm sorry, '52, and then we stayed in business until, what? [to wife] When did we close the store? We had all gone our separate ways...about 18 years ago we closed everything down. We sold all the houses and all, because the transient people started to intermarry. So they built their own homes so there was less demand. Today people want something real nice and real nice is real expensive. And real expensive can't be afforded. It's that simple. Salaries have not kept up with the cost of living. But in the early days, a dollar was...I remember when Texaco first came. Big pay was the oyster industry. And a big salary working as an oyster man was about 40 dollars a month. And the trapping industry. A trapper would make 20 to 30 thousand a year. That was in 1929. The big money was oystering. You get 40 dollars. But you had to stay out on the lakes for 40 to 60 days without coming home. You earned every penny of that. That was hard work. Then when Texaco came down and started to pay 25 cents an hour, that was unbelievable. And they'd let them do 12, 14 hours a day. Then with overtime, heck they were getting 60 and 80 dollars a month. I mean that was three or four times what the average salary was. When I started my drilling business, I worked over for Texaco, worked on a lot of old wells... roughnecks were getting a dollar twenty five an hour. That was the going rate. And by the time I gave up the rigs it was eight to ten dollars an hour, something like that.

They named the stadium [at Nicholls State University] after my dad. He had a professional baseball team in 1922 over here. He had a stadium that held 4,000 people, and he was a member of the Sugarbelt League. They played in Houston, they played Dallas, they played Baton Rouge, they played Shreveport, played Monroe. The Sugarbelt League, he called it. Back in 1922. His highest paid player was the pitcher. Forty dollars a month. He became the chairman of the board at the First National Bank of Commerce. Old Man Oulibear. He died about four years ago. He was my dad's star pitcher. He was good. Ever since then I've hated sports, because I'm

the one who had to sell beer and sodas all over the damn stadium, and everybody who wanted a beer was always the last seat at the top. So when they said they had a baseball game, I'd shout. I hated it. So to this day I hate any kind of sports, and I'm sure that subconsciously that's the reason. Because to me, I equate that with pain. I'd rather take a lickin' than see a ball game.

*How old were you when he had you start working out there?*

About seven, eight years old. And they didn't have styrofoam those days, they had inch and a half inch plywood with the cart two inches thick, and another piece of plywood. The box weighed 80 pounds before you put a bottle of beer in it. I see them walking around the stadium with packs with draft beer. Oh man, why didn't we have that?

*How'd your dad get into baseball?*

It was actually my mother. My dad didn't care if the sun came up or the sun went down, but my mother was a dynamo. When she...she had the nickname of the "Big Bell." When she rang, the whole neighborhood shuddered. When there was violence in a family, she would go take care of it. There was no law in this area. If a husband beat his wife, well he could wait for a good shellacking from my mother. And when the war came, she delivered the telegrams from the Red Cross, missing in action, killed in action. That took a toll on her life. And they started to, they had a store. They had an ice cream parlor. They had a barroom. They had a movie theater. And whenever there was ballgames, when radios first came out, all the men in the neighborhood would come to her living room. So, finally she put a stop to that. She put four pilings on the bayouside and ran wires all the way with the big bullhorns, and then every Sunday, you should have seen that, maybe five hundred to a thousand men listening to the ballgame, and nobody knew what anyone was saying because nobody spoke English. And Will Duet was the only person I know, he was about 18-20 years old in those days, I was a little bitty boy, and he had a hand speaker, and he'd interpret whether it was a foul, a man out or whatever.

I really don't know how the baseball team started because it started in '22, and I wasn't born until '29. We never really discussed it with my dad how he got started with that, but I know he figured with the bar and stuff, the baseball would bring people in. They had people from Monroe, Shreveport. I don't know how the hell they'd get here. In those days, with the roads we had, the Model-Ts, but that stadium was jam packed every Sunday. And the team would travel all over the state. Play baseball. Sugarbelt League. Dr. Louis Leblanc just passed away. He was his first baseman. He was a lefthander, first baseman, the dentist.

This would still be predominantly French had it not been for the oil field. I didn't speak a word of English until I was seven. French was my first language. But the oil field helped destroy the French language. Because all the transients came in and before you know it, to accommodate them people... I had an aunt. You should've watched the conversations between her. She didn't speak French. And my aunt didn't speak English. You should have seen those conversations. She didn't understand anything in French and my aunt didn't understand anything in English. She'd speak French, or tried, and I didn't think nothing of it, but when a stranger would come, they couldn't figure out what was going on. It was something to see.

Now to transact business, for example, they wanted to buy a lot or something like that, well in Golden Meadow they'd go to Marc Picciola, the state representative for many years. And then in the Galliano area they'd come to my mother, and my mother would pass a sale for them. Next time my dad would go to Thibodaux he would get everything notarized. In Cut Off it was the Elie Ducos' store there. The store from the plantation over there. In just about every community there was somebody that was educated. And my mother was called educated, but she only had a fifth grade education. My dad had a second grade education. But her fifth grade education today is equivalent to [a degree from a] university.

My grandfather's parents came from Bordeaux. And my dad's parents came from Alsace Lorraine. My mother spoke Parisian French and Cajun, because my grandfather couldn't speak Cajun, and he spoke strictly Parisian French. And there's so little difference. The French is the same as... I've traveled all over France many, many years, and the French in the province are exactly what we speak. Same as Quebec. But if you go to Paris, it's a different world. It's Parisian. People in the province, say from Brittany, they can't understand Parisian. And the Parisians have more of a spoiled French than the province do, because of open borders of Europe over the last century. I mean there's so much spoilage by German influence on French, or Hispanic, or what have you. It's, I find that the Parisian French is...I took it up at school, and it's not what they speak, I promise you. The only reason I took it up in school is that it's the only crib course I could find.

### **3.4. Mac Rome (September 22, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*McNeely "Mac" Rome was Texaco's production supervisor for the Golden Meadow and Leeville fields, going back to the 1950's. He reported to Bruce Pagliughi, who is Mac's neighbor in Golden Meadow. Mac's father was an iceman in Donaldsonville, selling ice all along the river road in the north part of Lafourche Parish. The family moved down to Golden Meadow in 1939, when Mac was 11 years old. They moved because Mac's older brother went to work for the people that owned the ice factory in Golden Meadow. The family continued to sell ice from Golden Meadow. There was very little refrigeration in those days.*

I remember one time, up here they had a lumberyard, and they used to have "rendezvous." I don't know if they ever told you about the rendezvous. Families used to fight. I'm not shittin' you none. Families used to fight with knives and everything else. One Sunday morning we were goin' up the bayou and they had a rendezvous. So Daddy pulled over on the side the bayou. We parked there and watched. And they had the damnest knock-down fights. I know one guy... they stabbed the livin' daylights outta him. Oh, yeah. The Callais and the Heberts. In those days they'd have, what they call it, the feuds between families. This is, '39. '39, '40.

And then, right in that time, too, right after that I guess, the oil field really boomed. And the Cajuns didn't know shit about roughneckin', anything, so a lot of Texans came in, you know. They came with the oil field. And they'd call 'em *Modie Texiens* (Damn Texan), you know. 'Cause they were rough. Roughnecks in those days were roughnecks, you know. And then, the Frenchmen, the Cajuns start roughneckin' with 'em, you know, and learnin' the business. But at first they didn't have any Cajuns in there. Most of these guys was trappers and trawlers. They didn't know anything about the oil field. So they had to bring in hands. 'Cause when we come

from Donaldsonville and we was a *Modie Texien*. Anybody from above the Intracoastal was considered a *Modie Texien*. A guy from Texas, you know. But after a while, the Cajuns start takin' over. Some of the Texans left. Some stayed and lived here. But at one time it was all Texans. All rough son of a guns, 'cause those days they were rough 'cause they'd follow the rigs, you know. Rig would tear down here and then they'd move to another place and they'd follow the rig.

*Was there kind of a hierarchy, that the Texiens had the top jobs and then...?*

Yeah, for a while. In this area, when the Texans came in, we noticed lot of 'em had the Masonic ring. And if you didn't belong to the Masonic Lodge, you didn't get up too much. The guy in Leeville, when I hired out, was a big Mason. And he turned down a lot of people. At one time the drillers was all Masonic men. Rough... the common hands was alright. But the guy that moves up was Masons. You don't have that anymore now. But, in those days they did. It wasn't fair. Didn't make him better qualified, it's just that he had the right ring. That was the sad part about it. If he'd been better qualified, I could understand it.

*Did they build their own houses down here when they came?*

Oh yeah. See, people in Golden Meadow came from Leeville and the people in Leeville came from Grand Isle and Cheniere. They moved up with the storms. A lot of 'em stopped here. But a lot of 'em continued on to Galliano and Cut Off. Just moved up. And then Golden Meadow, I'd say the last 30 years, there's not too many people that builds houses in Golden Meadows. 'Cause nobody wanna sell their property. So they go up to buy. But I'd say half of what's in Galliano and Cut Off is all originally from Golden Meadow. The families. But they're... sorta like me, I didn't have no property to sell. But my boy wanted to teach in Mathews so he moved over there. But a lot of families just didn't want sell their property so the kids moved up and bought property up the bayou. But they all originated from down here.

## 4. THE INDUSTRY AND THE WORKFORCE GROW

Two defining events occurred in the 1940's, transforming local society and economy along the Gulf of Mexico. But these events were markers of processes well underway by the '40's. The Second World War furthered the "Americanization" of a people, as Cajun historian Shane Bernard (2003) puts it. And the spudding of a well 10 and a half miles out in the Gulf in 1947 capped a process of adapting technologies to the new environment. Kerr-McGee's platform was "out of sight of land" and symbolically marked the beginnings of the offshore oil and gas industry.

With the *Texiens* who came in to exploit the hydrocarbons and gas in the marshes, the people of south Louisiana were exposed to outsiders. The enforced use of English in schools further pressured locals to adapt to a dominant national culture. But the participation of local men and women in the war effort – volunteers and conscripts in the armed services, workers in the industries of war and defense -- was the first significant opportunity for Cajuns and other residents of coastal Louisiana to travel the country and the world and to invest effort and emotion in the country-wide mobilization. Patriotism established deep roots in the region, and was on display when a number of these interviews took place – directly after the events of September 11, 2001. When the veterans returned from World War II, some availed themselves of the benefits of the GI Bill and sought higher education. Others found that the military regimen they had been exposed to would serve them well in the oil and gas industry, where orders had to be followed and chains of command were rigid. And locals had been exposed to the material goods of the country and would quickly become avid consumers, buying automobiles and television sets, electrical appliances and frozen foods. The initial tensions between outsider and local would subside, and skilled local residents began to move up those chains of command in oil operations and display the entrepreneurial aptitude for success in a competitive industry.

After the war, The Texas Company, with the lucrative rights it had obtained from the state and the Louisiana Land and Exploration Company, remained a major player in the marshes and bays of the coast. The company hired a number of locals, particularly to work in south Lafourche and the oil and gas fields of neighboring Terrebonne Parish. With Kerr-McGee's success off Morgan City, other companies began to go into open waters and out of sight of land. Humble and Freeport Sulphur established themselves on Grand Isle. Freeport mined the mineral off of Grand Isle and shipped it, molten, to its processing facility at Port Sulphur, along the Mississippi River. Humble had substantial properties in the Gulf and up into Barataria Bay, above Grand Isle. Exxon, Humble's successor, maintains a skeleton crew on the island today. Shell, early on, became a major figure offshore, and today leads the efforts to explore and drill in very deep waters off the Continental Shelf. The California Company, later Chevron, opened up the Bay Marchand field, not far off the beach from Port Fourchon. Bay Marchand is still producing today.

Most of these oil companies, as well as dozens of smaller companies that have since been absorbed, established a definitive organization of work for the industry. Much of the everyday activities involved in finding and producing oil and gas are contracted out to independent service companies. Contract drillers maintained an inventory of mobile drilling rigs and hired them out,

with crews, to perform the drilling operations. The drillers in turn hired specialized service companies – Halliburton, Baker Hughes, and Schlumberger are the most recognized names today – to carry out specific tasks. Often an oil company had only a single employee – the company man – stationed on a rig or platform to oversee operations. Helicopters contracted their fleets out to the companies to transport workers and small parts to the rigs and platforms offshore. Prior to the extensive use of helicopters (flown first by veterans trained in Korea, later by waves of Vietnam-experienced pilots), boats handled these transport needs. Boats ferried the bulk materials – drilling fluids, fresh water, drill pipes and well casings -- and crews to the offshore operations. Making and manning workboats of all shapes and functions was a niche that south Lafourche, in particular, filled from the start. Shrimpers cleared the trawl gear from their decks and hired out their wooden boats to the oil field operators. Now the parish builds and operates the largest of the craft working offshore waters around the world.

In the late 1940's and into the next decade, the move offshore was slowed by the controversy over who had jurisdiction of the Continental Shelf and the near-shore waters – the federal government or the coastal states with oil near their shores – California, Texas, and Louisiana. The “Tidelands cases” sought to resolve this dispute. In 1950, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with the federal government, and with the legality of existing state leases called into question, offshore exploration and development came to a standstill (Priest 2004). When Republican Dwight Eisenhower, a states-rightist, won the presidential election in 1952, Congress sought to compromise. The Submerged Lands Act was signed by the new president in 1953, awarding ownership of the first three miles of Louisiana's tide-covered lands to the state. (Florida and Texas, due to quirks of their colonial past, would get 12 miles out). Additional legislation followed, authorizing the federal Department of the Interior to regulate the leasing of resources outside this zone. Drilling on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) resumed.

Much of the oil found along the coast and out into the Gulf was found in association with salt domes. Molten salt pushes upwards, deforms rock strata above it and when solidified, the salt forms an impervious plug. Hydrocarbons – oil and gas – move upward through porous rock layers, typically sandstone or limestone, and get trapped in the pores of rock under the impervious strata. Water, usually with a high salt content, is heavier than oil and itself gets trapped under the oil. When a well is drilled, pressure is reduced where the well penetrates the formation, and the water, under higher pressure, forces the hydrocarbons towards the well and to the surface. This is a “water-drive” well, and substantial amounts of salty water also rise to the surface, bringing with it the fluids used to complete and seal the well. This “produced water” contains toxic materials in addition to salt. Historically, it was simply dumped back into the bays, marshes, and the Gulf, once the oil and gas had been separated off. As environmental awareness gained hold in the 1960's and 1970's, efforts were made to require safe disposal of produced water. The added costs would be one factor that pushed Texaco to sell off its holdings in coastal Louisiana and move to the OCS.

As the oil and gas industry expanded off the Louisiana coast, many of the residents of the coastal parishes continued in the traditional seasonal rounds of shrimping, trapping, and oystering. Others continued to fish, working the normal shift of seven days straight on the platforms, doing their other pursuits in the week onshore. And some, like Abraham Griffin of Golden Meadow,

simply added oil work to the seasonal round, quitting during the shrimp months, fishing long enough and hard enough to “make the season.”

#### **4.1. Loulan Pitre (September 24, 2001; Cut Off, LA)**

*After the war, Loulan Pitre built derricks, and took them down to be moved to other drilling sites. Some of his jobs were land and marsh jobs, in the still-producing fields on either side of Bayou Lafourche. Some were offshore. One of them was for Jerry McDermott – a platform out in open water, 10 miles or so from land, on Ship Shoal Block 32. Kerr-McGee Oil Industries out of Tulsa was the field’s operator. Kermac 16 began producing oil in November of 1947, the first successful well out of sight of land. Pitre realized at the time that his career as a derrick builder was limited. “Jack knifes,” as he calls them, movable drilling barges, were being developed. John Hayward designed and built Breton Rig 20 in 1949, a “platform supported by piles on top of a submerged hull” (Lankford 1971, page 1,394). It could be refloated and moved to the next drilling location. Kerr-McGee contracted Ocean Drilling and Exploration Company to build a virtually identical barge in 1954, Mr. Charlie. Moored on the bank of the Atchafalaya River off Morgan City, the rig is now a museum and training facility.*

When I went to work, well, the war started at Pearl Harbor. I was shrimping then. I made my 21 in March. Had a buddy from here, he just died recently...he was going to join the flying cadets. You don't remember that program. The flying cadets. You had to pass the test. I was pretty good in mathematics and algebra. You know what I said... talk him into going, to sign up, to the Army. Taking the test, that wasn't too hard...you do the equation, which I knew. There was a lot of stuff I didn't know, but I figured if I got over 51 percent I'd pass. The other guy says, "Man, that test was hard." I said, "If you had done your homework in school it wouldn't have been that hard." I always spoke out of turn. I kind of learned not to talk that way since then. And I told the guy, "What do we do now?" "I don't know." We took our physical, you know, and put our clothes back on. I says, "When can we go see our plane?" "What do you mean, a plane? You have to be in school at least a year before you even look at a plane!" I said, "I'm sorry, "I said, "I thought we'd be flying at least next week." He knew I was joking then. He said, "You all go home and don't do a thing." I said, "What about the draft?" I knew I'd get drafted. He says, "Just don't go." He said, "You're in the service now, you're in the service." "Okay."

So we went home and waited. One week went by, two weeks went by, and I'm chomping the bit, you know, I want to go. And then...this was about four weeks later, no word from them, never. I'm thinking about writing them a letter. I said, "Tell you what I'm going to do." I called Chester. My buddy Chester. "Chester," I said, "I'm not waiting any more." He said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I decided I'm going to join the Marine Corps." Because the Marines were getting ready to be shipped to Australia. No word about them fighting yet, but they were going to Australia. I knew where that was. "Marine Corps?" he says. "Well listen, Loulan," he says, "I went and offered myself once. Now if they want me, they'll have to come get me." He didn't know whether they'd call or not. It turns out later, I found out later, during the war, I'd been accepted. I'd passed the test. My mother got a letter from the War Department saying I could report so and so and she said I was already out in the Marine Corps going places. "Well, we can get him out." And then my mother wrote me a letter telling me to get out. No. I liked

the Marine Corps. It's a good opportunity. I didn't know the danger I was in though. Real danger. At that time, I'm in the Marine Corps, taking basic. I went to train. Marines land on Guadalcanal. Uh-oh, we're in trouble here. Read all those stories about the ships getting sunk and all that. Said we're getting more news than probably the public. In the service you get everything that comes out. You know more than the average. And I went through, I went through all those operations. Never got hit, never got hurt. I came back home, I'm glad I took it. And two and a half years after I left here, on a Monday morning, to getting a call, they gave me a leave. Brought us back to the state for rest and recreation.

We were getting ready to invade Japan when we dropped those nuclear weapons on the Japanese...that Okinawa campaign, that was a mean son of a gun. There were some people there. But if you don't get hit, you don't drop dead, you... I came back. They used to give 50 dollars a week for the veterans, 52-20. Twenty dollars a week, for 52 weeks. And I went over there to check in for my 20 bucks a week, to me that was a fortune, 'cause we had no salaries, not like today in the service. I was a staff sergeant getting 80 to 90 dollars a month. By the time they took the insurance out, you didn't get much left. And these poor privates, they didn't get anything. I went to this place to check in for my 20-52 they used to call them, that girl says, "What are you qualified to do?" I says, "What?" I was bitter. "What are you asking me that for?" She says, "Well, you've got to tell me what you're qualified to do." Lining me up for a job. Says, "All I'm qualified to do right now is kill people." Which I was, that was all I was qualified to do. Kill people. I says, "I'm only qualified to kill people." Well, she was insulted, she called the man in...I said, "Sir, the blood's still dripping on my hands from Japan...you want me to tell you what I'm qualified to do? I told the girl..." "Oh," he says, "You just got out of the service last week." "Came home, last week." "Oh, well, we don't know if we can put you on the...what work do you want to do?" "Right now I want to take a month off." Which wasn't long. I said, "I don't want to do any work." He said, "Well, we can't put you on the 50..." So I never got a nickel. All the other guys had lied that way, they were getting their 20 bucks a week, which was nice. They would sit down at their home and buy beer with their 20 bucks, and the guy would feed you. He was a hero, you know. That was a mess. But I realized then why they take young people to fight wars. Older people would start considering that stuff, they wouldn't go. They'd refuse.

Never got a penny. My wife was going to have a baby. A year after we got married, she was going to have a baby. And I had gotten wind that the government was... if we had gotten married before I was out of the service, which I had, and I was an uncommissioned officer, they was going to pay us for the hospitalization. Well, I didn't have much money. All the money I had saved from the service...about five or six dollars a month. I went to see the head nurse. We always had a head nurse, they'd been there before Jesus Christ, I guess. She says, "It's not worth the trouble." She was my cousin. She says, "I wouldn't fool with that. It's not worth the trouble." Had my wife go in the hospital, and the doctor would do it...the government pay the bill. I said, "I think it's worth the trouble. Maybe it's not worth the trouble but it's worth the money." And we went, and they paid everything. And she, that just kind of discouraged me from the bureaucrats, you know, "not worth the trouble." I'll never forget that statement she made. It wasn't no trouble for me. Hadn't done that, the chances are she would've had to have had the child at home. Which was dangerous in a way. Well, try to get a baby into this world now for 89 dollars. *Good God.* Eighty-nine dollars for pre-natal care...and... It might be a little

jumbled, but it's all helping. Of course those episodes that are hilarious to me might not be hilarious to other people. But, life hadn't been bad.

I went and worked for Jerry McDermott. He was a contractor for the oil company. But we were building these oil derricks, I was on a crew of rig builders, one of the most dangerous work in the world. I went in the crew, stayed for seven years, then they came with those jack knifes, I say this in passing because this is why I quit rig building. Not quit. Necessity, had my family. They came with those jack knifes, the rig builders were out of work, out of work because there are no more rigs. No more derricks. *"Oh man, I'm going to have to quit this."*

(Jerry McDermott called). I got all excited. "We need to do a big job in the Gulf." "In the Gulf?" "Yeah, yeah biggest rig ever seen, ever built." Sounded good, probably be like that for months, it's getting three seventy-five an hour, pretty good wages. Of course not good work but good wages. "We're going to build, build a platform out in the Gulf, all steel! Oh man, it's looking up." I knew they couldn't bring their jack knifes out there, it's heavy stuff. So we go out, we pack up, we get an old Navy vessel. I've ridden some in the Pacific. I never thought I'd be on one of these junkyards again. But the old sea vessel had been stripped of all the ornaments and had them for living quarters. Went out there about six miles off of Morgan City, dropped the hook, dropped the anchor for the next day. Four big barges loaded with big steel. We put a structure and they got us helping 'em. I got more, and then here comes a derrick, big derrick, man. A hundred seventy-six feet high, everything was double. Everything doubled, girth, braces – doubled. Talk about a job. That way we start that, it's all bolted, not welded, bolted. We tried to run the bolts through, couldn't get the bolts through. They forgot to allow for the galvanizing. Didn't leave enough tolerance. What are we going to do now? We get some reamers. I spent two weeks reaming out every hole in that derrick, so we could run the bolts and we did it. I didn't moan. Working 10, 12, 14 hours a day I could see myself buying something more for my house. And we built the derrick, Kerr-McGee, first rig, first derrick. I want to tell you this because I got something else after, and in the '60's, '70's. They had a reunion-like thing in Morgan City of all of the people that had worked on the first rig, drilling, whatever, got invited to a big barbecue, and they didn't invite us. We were not invited. As if we had never been there because without us they couldn't have done it. A lot of times we could've walked off, they would've been, they probably would've abandoned the thing. If we hadn't built the derrick they wouldn't have drilled the holes, and they hit oil. They hit oil. That's why it took off from there.

*So did you go to this party anyway even if you weren't invited?*

No, I took it hard. Big reunion for the discovery well. We worked on the discovery well. That's what that deal in Morgan City when they had that reunion, that big Kerr-McGee rig off of Atchafalaya. They did not invite us. I think I'm the only, I think Al and I are the only two left alive. Rig builders. We're not in the best of health either. Al, he's next door. I can't understand him. I can read his lips. He's still alive. All the rest are dead. A couple of them kept working after I left, fell off the derrick and killed themselves. All the rest died of over-smoking. They know cigarettes will put you in the ground.

*How long did you guys keep working together after you finished that offshore rig?*

Oh, long time. We built a bunch of rigs, we stayed, we'd stay weeks on end out there. Once we put up a derrick all the way to the top and during the night the weather got bad. There must've been a storm because we had that big barge, that big crane, it tore up all of the anchors. And we wound up on the beach at Grand Isle and barely, barely could get away from there. Went back the next day, it was calm, clear, and the rig had fallen over. We left. [The derrick] slipped off the structure, fallen. We should've bolted it down, but who would've dreamed something like that would've happened? 'Cause sometimes we had to skid. It had to be exactly square. You had to move it to fit it. We hadn't bolted it. We should've. *Oh God*, it had slipped and fallen off. I wasn't in management, so I just sat back down and looked at it. It was a disaster.

*You started as soon as you got back from the war, starting with Jerry [McDermott]? When did you start with Jerry?*

New Years Day, 1947. I remember 'cause everything was frozen here and all the icicles were hanging down the walls right here in Cut Off. Cold, and we took off. Guess where? Key West, Florida. To build a rig, and we went to Key West, took us two and a half days. We took our time. We were in the union, big rig building, we were in the union, AFL-CIO. So we would drive eight hours, eight hours a day. I like the union and your pay was the same. I'd rather get paid for eight hours instead of driving 12 and still getting paid eight. Wouldn't you? And if we've driven we get double time, so we take our time getting there, and that big old derrick. They did a little exploration off of Florida, this derrick was about 200 yards off the beach inside Ft. Myers, something like that, I think. The moment of truth had arrived. Get up in the derrick, I had to go up. I climbed up there and I tell you the truth, I'm not going to go in details, I had to tear that whole derrick down. It's really hard. To loosen all the bolts before, and when you tear it down you have to get down fast, you don't take them, them out, just loosen them. There are four bolts and a brace and a flange. You take three out and leave one. Move! You did all of this, it didn't take too long, half a day. When I got up there, I looked, 136 feet up there, no safety belt, and a little 12-inch scaffold. If it hadn't been Florida I would've come down off of that and never went back. But what could I do? I was trembling like when you see a buck deer and you can't shoot it. I climbed down. I shouldn't have been afraid but it was a new experience. Well we went to Florida one more time and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, work, work, work and that's when we were really developing all of these fields. All over the place, like Leeville and Golden Meadow. We'd build rigs, all the time. Had a lot of derricks in Golden Meadow but we didn't have a lot of big ones. All these were small shallow wells. And they wanted to go deep, fifteen thousand feet, oil, you need big rigs. But we had all the work we wanted. All of a sudden they came up with all of these jack knifes you know. Jack knifes, you know, they lift up. That knocked us out.

The jack knifes kept creeping up on us and all of a sudden they were there. I don't know where they came from. We used to go everywhere with McDermott, everywhere where they drilled the well. And we kept hearing jack knife and we said, what the heck is a jack knife? Somebody explained to me what a jack knife was. I made a mental note that we were going to have it rough before too long and I wasn't wrong. Now they got jack knifes out in the Gulf.

Once a fellow from here called me on the telephone...I knew he wanted something but he wouldn't come out and say it...I talked to the guy, he says ... "How much y'all charge to tear down a derrick?" Oh...I says, "Quite a bit." I didn't know...I never asked McDermott how much they were charging. I said, "I can call up the office and find out for you." He said, "No, no...I don't want to deal with McDermott, I want you to go tear it down for me." I said, "Oh. I'm practically, I'm not, but I'm practically on the contract with McDermott." I said, "What do you want done?" He said, "I got a couple of derricks in Golden Meadow. A company from Arkansas bought them." They're itty bitty derricks, about 88 foot tall, and I knew we could do it. It's a cinch. You need a j-pole and you need a cat head, get up there and throw everything out, you never see it again, it won't get all bent up again... I went and talked to my friend over here, he's dead now. I said, "I got a deal. Give me a day, and call me back." I went to talk to my friend Pete, L.B. I said, "I got a good deal," He says, "What's that?" I says, "I can get the work to tear down some 88s in Golden Meadow. They've been abandoned and are still standing."

See, they used to build them on concrete pillars, with those rigs. No floor, no nothing. He says, "Yeah?" Says, "How much is he willing to give you?" I said, "I didn't reckon a price. He wanted to know but I says I didn't have no idea. How much do you think we should charge him?" He says, "Well we can tear one in a day, you and I." A ...swindle, you know. I'm not supposed to be working on the side. He says, "Tell him you want three fifty apiece." Which was no fortune, 'cause you take three fifty and cut it in two and it's not... seven hundred dollars for the two. "Okay." So I go tell the guy...he calls up again ...got a big repair yard that repairs diesel engines... everybody knew about it. I says, "Tell you what, I'll go tear down your two derricks but be sure we get paid." I says, "You want those derricks?" He says, "No, it's a company from Arkansas." I said, "Be sure we get our money." "Yeah," he says, "they said to find out from you...if you do the job and we'll pay you right now." I said, "We want seven hundred for the two of them." "For the two of them?" he says. Well he was getting a deal and he knew it. I could've told him two thousand. Two thousand he would have agreed. I said, "Yeah, seven hundred for two of us and two days." I said, "Listen, the way we work, we might get called tomorrow, we might not be back for a week...for McDermott," because I said, "We work for McDermott." "Oh, don't worry about it," he said, "Just when you get through tearing them down, let me know." Went over there to the derrick, on the east side there was one of them. Get up there like a couple of chimpanzees...before three o'clock we had that thing on the ground. We threw it all over the place...we don't want to stack it, you know. If you know you've got to rebuild it, you're kind of careful how you handle it, but we weren't about to ever see that thing again. The next day we go back...no calls from McDermott, we go try the other one. The other one's a little tougher—we had to work until about four. Threw it all over the ground...and I went and told Buggalah, his name was Buggalah, that we had done the jobs and the rigs were still out at the location, everything torn down, structure and all. 'Course one of them didn't have a structure. "Okay," I said...and I saw he was kind of hedging, and I was hedging, and I was about to leave, and I said, "Where's my money?" He went and got the check...the check right there. And for me, that was good then. Two days I would've been home doing nothing. I thought I did something wrong. No insurance, because I wasn't covered by liability from McDermott, when we work on the side...I took a chance, and I'm lucky nothing happened. There was only two and that was it. And I don't know. Just lately they tore the rest of them down and got the government to clean the pits and all.

#### **4.2. Martial Babin (July 18, 2001; Galliano, LA)**

*Martial Babin is an 80-year old Chevron retiree who lives in a relatively new subdivision on the east side of the bayou. He grew up in St. Charles, between Raceland and Thibodaux, and retired from Chevron about 20 years ago, a few years short of company retirement age of 62, because his second wife wanted to enjoy what they had. Martial pointed to a huge mounted fish on the wall and talked about how she, not he, would always catch the big ones.*

*Martial rose through Chevron's ranks, starting on their drilling rig in the Barataria field. When the rig was sold, he was moved into transportation at the Leeville base, responsible for supplies for Chevron's Bay Marchand complex off the beach at Fourchon. After, as he says, getting big and fat at that job, he was moved into production, second only to the superintendent of Bay Marchand.*

Let me tell you to begin with. I went three weeks in the tenth grade and didn't finish high school. My daddy would make me work in the field. My father was a farmer part of his life. Then he sold ice cream. We always had a grocery store and different things. I didn't get a chance to play any kinds of sports at school so I got discouraged. I lived a block from the school, up here at St. Charles. I used to walk to school in about four minutes. I didn't want to go to school so he'd whip my ass every night. Finally, he let me quit. At 17 years old, I went to work on a dredge boat for 15 cents an hour. I was working 12 hours a day for a dollar and a half. I went to New Orleans and bought me a 1934 Dodge automobile for two hundred dollars. It was in tip-top shape. It was brand new. I lied about my age and I brought somebody with me to verify it. When I got home, my daddy whipped my behind and he made me promise I'd be a good boy, then he'd let me keep it. I had a 20 dollars per month note on it. I was only making 40 dollars per month, but I was single and didn't smoke or gamble. I got married for the first time when I was 20 years old.

I didn't go to the service. They turned me down. I had asthma. During the war, I was working in Valasco, Texas in the metal department, where we were getting this hot metal. It is light metal that they use in the aircraft. That irritated my bronchial tubes. So, when they called me up, I went for a physical in 1943 or 1944. They classified me as 4-F and they never recalled me. I didn't go to the service. So, I raised five kids—four girls and a boy. I had one girl that was born while I was living in Angleton, Texas from 1942 to 1945. Angleton is about 50 miles south of Houston. It is on the coastline next to Freeport. But, these magnesium plants that I am telling you about was in Valasco, which is on the beach next to Freeport. While I was in the plant, I got to know a man that had been in the oil field before. So, after the war finished he went into the oil field and brought me with him. We worked for Glenn McCarthy out of Houston. We drilled a well, or several wells actually, on some colored people's property between Angleton and West Columbia. We made them rich overnight. I stayed there for about a year and a half. Then, I came back home in 1945...

We didn't have a whole lot of things to carry, but I had an old Chevrolet and we lived like the Clampetts. I had that thing tied all around on top and everything. It took us about 12 hours to

make that route back. But I had a home already. I had bought me a home before I left and I was renting it. When it got vacant, I moved into it. I worked there and I had a short stay with Joe W. Brown drilling in back of Valentine. Then, I worked with Mobil in Leeville on the east canal. Then, I worked for people in back of Golden Meadow. On August 8, 1947, I went to work for Chevron. I put in eight years on one of their drilling rigs. I barely had a high school education and I was not an engineer, but I learned the trade through practice and later on I was doing engineer work because we had a lot of rigs running and not enough engineers to go around. So, they made a drilling foreman out of me and I was doing everything an engineer would do to a well. Later, as these engineers came out of school my job got lighter and lighter. But still, they had to at least put in three weeks or longer with someone that had practical experience. I broke in many of them. Three years later, I was working for them. They were my bosses. Anyway, I had a real good life with Chevron Oil Company.

Bay Marchand was started in 1948. They had a lease dispute between the state and the federals. It would shut down for a little over a year and started drilling again in late 1949. I was, at that time, still on the drilling rig in Barataria. I would go out there when our rig didn't have any wells to work over. We would go offshore and we would work on these rigs, help them and do roustabout jobs. In 1954, that little rig we were on in Barataria was sold by the company and I was brought to Leeville and given a transportation job. I didn't know anything about boats, but I learned quickly. I took care of all the boat traffic. I knew all the equipment for the rigs that had to be sent and whatever you needed on the drilling rig—fresh water and whatever. All I had to do there was learn more about the boat business, and that I did. In late 1954 to late 1957, I was the transportation foreman at Leeville. Then, our operation was growing faster and faster all the time.

Let me back up a little bit and talk about the helicopter. Before the time of the helicopter, we had to do all of these crew changes and we were getting to where we had 80 to 85 people to a crew. We were working 7 and 7—two crews. It was rough going, having to change crews in rough seas. We would work from Wednesday to Wednesday. Then in 1955, the helicopter came out and we were able to change our crews out using the helicopter. We didn't have to have that long boat ride. Back then, they didn't have all these modern supply boats. The first supply boat came out in 1956 or early 1957. The company built two of their own—the *Tayte* and *Borre*. Then, going back now to the drilling, in late 1957 we were working 3 and 4 and spent one day on the rig for a crew change on the day you got off. I went for seven days without even taking my shoes off. I would cat nap in the lounge chair after I would eat. I would never go to bed because there was four of us taking care of nine rigs. By the time we got through with one completion, we were called on another rig to fix problems. I completed some of the first triples in the first dual. That is three strings in one—different heights. I did all the preparations myself. Of course, they give you the orders but I had to follow them. That is where my experience on the rig came in so good for me because I knew all the work even though I wasn't an engineer. Then, in January of 1960, we went to work 7 and 7. We were able to get more people coming out of school and more engineers. They gave us each a raise and a 7 and 7 schedule. By then, I was taking it easy. I was big and fat, eating and sleeping too much in between jobs. On May 30, 1960, they put me in production. They made me an assistant foreman for the production group. I worked with a man named Charley Sanders, a great big guy with a big head. He was rough but he made you learn the trade faster. I got to be almost just like him. I learned from hard work.

Then he left in 1974 and I got his job. I was the foreman. I was supervising 80 to 85 people. I had six assistant foremans working under me. Right now, I think I am the only one left. They all died at the ages of 50, 53, and some barely made 60. One guy died at 45. I am lucky that I am still here...

I retired May 1, 1980 at 59 years old. Last May was 21 years of retirement. I didn't get the package. That was voluntary and I lost 15 percent of my retirement because I retired before age. I was 59. I would have had to work until I was 62 to get all of it. Then, I even lost some of my social security. But, still we had a good life. After I retired at 59, we finished with the camp. I had started building the camp before I retired. I had kept all of my vacation until the end of the year. I got six weeks vacation for the year. I had a year and a half of sick leave and I didn't touch any part of it. I lost every nickel of it. A lot of these men working for me out there, after the tenth anniversary there with the company, they knew they would lose it if they wouldn't take their two weeks per year. It would only build up so much. I would build up to one year and 26 weeks of full time and 26 weeks of half time. A lot of them would pretend to be sick. Those who lived locally, I would go and check up on them.

I was, at one time, known to be the highest paid field foreman that Chevron had, and I am not bragging. I was a class A-1 or 1-A. From what my boss told me, I was the only one who had that classification because of my ability to get the job done. When I retired, there was no packages like they had later where the company offers you a year's pay or more. They would retire the older men and replace them with engineers and younger men, which I never understood why. Once a man had all his experience and was still in his 50's, they would retire him and put in some others. In fact, I was a volunteer retiree. They did not want me to retire. They gave me a 3,000 dollars per year raise right before I retired in hopes to keep me for a couple more years. Then, my wife was right. She wanted me to retire young so we could enjoy some good times together. That is when we built the camp. We had a fishing camp. We spent 12 years there. Finally, when I got older and she got sick, I sold the camp and just last year got rid of my boat. I got a big carport out there that I used to keep my boat in and now it is empty. This was my 30-year watch. It has a couple little diamonds on it but you can barely see them. I only wear it when I go out.

I told you when [Bay Marchand] field started and how it started. I think we bought that field from some other company. I forgot who it was. They drilled some dry holes and they gave it up. We went in there and at one time we had 150 to 200,000 barrels of oil per day and God knows how much gas wells we had. We were a group of people that all worked together and had some good bosses and some bad ones. There was only one boss ahead of me. He was the Superintendent. I was working for him. Later, the field got split up in different areas and we had some other foremen. They had two or three other men that was doing the same work I was doing. Each of us had our own share of the oil field.

I don't know what I left out about the boat business. When we started off, we were going offshore in some 15 foot seas in some wooden boats hauling people day and night. The way we would get off of these boats was by a swing rope that was attached to the top of the structure. You would reach out there and get a hold of the structure and watch the swell. You swing

through the air like Tarzan and grab ahold of the structure. Someone would hand your baggage over to you or whatever. So, before the helicopter, that is how we were changing crews.

What they did was drill a pilot well and then they would set a big structure over it. We had some wells with as many as 62 and 65 wells, counting the triples and the duals, see. Then, they would set all these big caissons while they put the structure down. When you got ready to move, you just slide the drilling rig over to another slot and you would start another well. They would move in a smaller rig so there were two rigs, one workover and one drilling rig. The little rig would complete the well while we were drilling in the other one. We drill these platforms up in nothing flat. Most of the wells in those days would average 10 and 8,000 feet. Later, we went much deeper. They put in the big water flood project where we pump salt water into the sand and float the remaining of the oil to the surface. We would pump, I can't remember how many barrels of water per day, but we had engines that wouldn't fit into this room with 3,500, 4,000 pounds of pressure. I hear it through the grapevine 'cause I haven't been out there that they only have about 14, 15 people out there in production and that production is down to less than 10,000 barrels. I spoke to one guy that was still working out there not too long ago and he told me that.

We were pulling all of that oil out of there. We could get any amount of oil we wanted to. They formed some units and you pick the best well in the same sand to go ahead and water flood and you flow them for all of the rest of them. See, the state always had a per-well allowable. But, when they put these water flood units in we could get a unit allowable. It didn't make no difference if you made all of it from one well or if you made it from all of the wells. Most of the time we would just pick the best well and we would shut the other ones in and flow whatever we had for the complete unit for the water flood.

I seen men get killed offshore and seen men get sick. They would put them in the helicopter and bring them in. Coming back to that water flood, one day we were going to, in fact, we went through the alphabet with the structures. We start going doubles, AA, BB, CC, and all of those. So that tells you how many structures we had out there. These were large structures and we had individual bunk houses that would house four, five, or six men. They would do their own cooking. They would bring their groceries on Wednesday or Thursday, whenever their crew change was. Sometimes that was hard to do because of the rough seas. We had to battle the rough seas all the time. Of course, later when we got better boats the seas weren't a problem because the boats were much larger. To begin, I would haul groceries out there, when I was in the transportation job, on barges and we would cover them with a tarp. We had six LSTs out there, big ships that we would store a lot of stuff on them, we would anchor them to the platform. When you got on the east side of the seas, they weren't rough so you were able to unload them. We bought these old Army ships and converted them and made them into living quarters. I can go on for days talking about all this.

They had all these service people. Of course they had contract service people and at one time they had all kinds of contract people to keep from having too many people on our payroll. This way they wouldn't have to lay off anybody. I worked for 33 and a quarter years and we had not laid anybody off for lack of work until recently, since my retirement. What we used to do was place them on the production boats or somewhere else. They all had jobs. Some didn't want that job and quit because they wasn't happy. In 1984, Chevron bought the Gulf people. It seems to

me like the Gulf people bought Chevron because they got all of the breaks. I know what my fellow workers used to tell me. ... Okay, it was August 6, 1947 to May 1, 1980. It was the 100 years medallion [showing it]. My boss, when I retired, fixed this up for me as a retirement gift. From 1870-1979 was when it came out and it was a hundred years then. I worked a good while after that, well I retired in 1980 so I didn't work all that long after that. This was my little engineer boss (showing photo). I made him. He came out of school and he was smart, but he didn't have the experience. He is retired now and living in Lafayette. He calls me and talks to me. When I had my last hip surgery, he called me and made my day. His name is James Cole [from] somewhere up north, Oklahoma or Nebraska. I don't remember. He retired in November of 1995. I was the only one in the group from the foreman's area that was invited to his retirement party. But, when I retired, we had a big bunk house and that thing was full. All of these engineers and people that I worked with was there. They gave me all kinds of things—toasters, coffeepot, and a lot of stuff.

*Give me an idea of what you would have to do in production.*

Well, when I was in drilling, I took care of drilling. When I was in production, I took care to make sure that everyone was happy offshore. I was there to keep discipline among the workers and make sure they were happy. I had to learn about their families. I also had to supervise the oil field in general. If a job came in and they were having trouble, I would be right there working with them and helping them. I would more or less make the decisions of what we were going to do next. I would communicate with my boss, we would discuss it, and we would decide which was the best route to take. I would fly in the helicopter from structure to structure just about every day. One day I took a drowning man out of the ocean. I'll never forget that.

*Was it somebody from the rigs?*

No, it was some winos out of New Orleans. One had money for beer, the other had money for gas, and the other had the boat so they went fishing. I had been watching them all day long. They were going from structure to structure. They got off the boat one time and didn't tie the boat up good and it got away from them. They didn't even know each other. One did lose his life. One guy jumped in to catch it, but it was too fast and he couldn't get to it. We got a mayday call from Leeville saying, "Man overboard!" This pilot was first day on the job. I had never flown with him before and I didn't know what he could do. But, he was perfect. We were right over them. He put the collectors down, and we hit that water. The other guy was holding the drowned guy by the shirt. I got down and we lost control of the helicopter because there was too much weight on one side. I pulled them in with me. We took them to the captain of the ship, who was like the doctor. He gave the drowned guy a shot but he was already dead. We never heard anything from their families. We thought they would sue us or something, but they didn't. I did get a letter of recommendation for the good job that I had done—me and the pilot. Once you fly with a pilot often, you begin to trust them. But, when they come out on hot days, you start to wonder awhile. After he pulled us out of that deal, I really thought he was a good pilot.

*What is the most dangerous part about the business—transportation or working on the drilling rig?*

Working on the rig is hazardous, but no more hazardous than being on the highway on the Fourth of July. I never really got hurt. I got my finger jammed a few of times. I was a foreman most of my life but I did a lot of work too. I did roughneck. The first time, I roughnecked for 14 days. I got my first drilling job that came open. I was still in Texas then. When I came to work with Chevron, I could have gone to work in January. My buddy from Houma, who died last year, was the driller that I worked for on the contract rigs. When he went to work for Chevron, he came home for me to go with him. I was drilling then in a well in back of Golden Meadow. I didn't go in January, but in August I had a blowout and we got runned off. The firemen came on the drilling rig and didn't put the mud back in the hole. When you pull the pipe out of the hole, you have to put the mud back in there for weight to keep the gas and oil pressure down. Well, they never put the mud in the hole and when I pulled a bit out of the rotary it blew out for about four minutes. Big rocks were coming out all the way to the crown.

*Did it catch fire?*

No, it didn't catch on fire, thank God. It still had too much mud in it. It would have if I wouldn't have shut it in. The old toolpusher, it was seven in the morning and he was in his car doing the report and his car got full of sand. He come out blowing like a stuffed pig. Somebody had to take the blame for it. They ran off the whole crew. My buddy was working for Chevron in Barataria and I knew he had to pass through Raceland. The next day, I sat on the Raceland Bridge waiting for him to come across. When he passed, I stopped him and told him I was ready to go to work. He told me he had a schoolboy that would be leaving in a week and a half. He said he would talk to the superintendent to see if he could go now so that I could start working then. Two days later, I went to work for them. His name was Sally Biggs from Houma. Our superintendent then with Chevron was L.C. Swallow from Rayne, Louisiana. He died of a brain tumor in '93. He died when I was in the hospital having my first hip surgery and I couldn't go to his funeral.

*Did you have to evacuate very much?*

Yes. We used to evacuate when a hurricane was about 40, 60 hours away from us if the weather people showed that it was most likely heading our way. In the early days, we used to close production, load everybody in the boat, and bring them all into port. They would watch the weather and when the hurricane was over they'd come back. Through the last few years, we had automation. There was technology built that we could float the wells and shut them off from the base. They keep a record of it at the base on the computers. If a well would be leaking or something was going wrong, you could shut it off from the base if the storm got bad enough. We would take our people off a little earlier because we could control it from the base. In the earlier days, we would even stay out there 15, 18 hours before it would hit. The only hurricane that ever really hit us in my career was Betsy that came in over Port Fourchon. Betsy had 125 miles an hour wind in Raceland, where I was living at the time. It hit broadside my house. I had an old wood framed house that I built myself. I had 42 people in my house that night. Other people's houses got blown off the blocks or their roofs blew off. I had a set of twins in my house

that were two weeks old that I picked up out of a trailer park when I went to pick up my daughter. We picked that family up also. We made five pounds of coffee that night. The eye of the storm passed about one o'clock the morning. I drove from Raceland to Lockport to check on my other daughter behind a furniture store. They were asleep and I could hardly wake them up. They didn't even know there was a hurricane.

*Some of the drilling rigs were run on the gas, weren't they?*

Yes, they have engines that run off of natural gas. They have a lot of diesel engines too. The rig I was on for Chevron was gas. The engine burns just like the engine in your car. You can have a natural gas vehicle. All of the gas stations in Raceland have them. You can have a propane one too. I guess they bottle up that natural gas. I am not too familiar with that. I am familiar with propane. Propane lets out vapor and forms the gas. But it is a liquid to begin with. Anyway, this is how these engines would run. It had a carburetor on it that would use gas, a vapor fuel, instead of gasoline or liquid fuel. Before that time, it was steam rigs. That rig that was next to my daddy's property was a steam rig because one of the boilers blew and killed one of our firemen one day. I had just gone put some cutting from the mud to dry. We would catch cutting and send them to the lab. You had to put them in a bag and dry them out. I heard that thing and I looked in the air and saw that boiler about 200 feet in the air. The barrel end hit the ground, made a big hole and buried itself. Then it was right in front of the road so I took the toolpusher's car and I rode through the canefield to take that man to the hospital, but he didn't make it there. He was bleeding from everywhere. It threw him in the water pit that was behind the boiler. We were getting this water from a well we had drilled. That water turned salty. That salt built up calcium in the water line it would feed the boiler and it wasn't getting any more water. The heat of the boiler just melted it down and its pressure dropped causing it to blow up. Oh, I seen all kinds of things. One man working on a drill pipe that fell on him and killed him.

*Was any part of your salary dependent on how you did in a hole?*

Not on individual wells, but as an overall base, you would get a merit raise every year if your boss thought that you earned it. He would put in for it and you would get it. Twenty-one years ago, I was making sixty thousand per year because I had gotten all these raises along the way. I started making five hundred a month. When I went into transportation, the guy that brought me over there said that if I did good for 30 days that I would get a raise. And I did get that raise. I had a pretty good record of doing my job well. One of my bosses used to tell me I was like a football player. He would tell me to take the ball and go through the line and I would go. That is how he used to refer to me as.

*What was the main reason you switched over to transportation?*

They moved me around where they needed me. I went to transportation because they sold the rig that I was working on. Then they had to make room for me. They were satisfied with my performance. I didn't care if I got to be superintendent. I just wanted to have a job to raise my family. My worst nightmare right now is that I don't have a job. Then, I wake up and say, "You damn fool, you been retired for 21 years." Another thing, I go offshore and I call the helicopter

and it doesn't answer. That wakes me up and I get sweaty. That is how much I used to like my work. It is in my blood.

#### **4.3. Hurby Plaisance (July 23, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*After high school, Hurby Plaisance started working on Rowan inland barges in Timbalier Bay in 1948, then became a Texaco employee on steam rigs on lake fields around Houma, Leeville, Golden Meadow, and elsewhere. By the time he retired from Texaco in 1987, he had risen to senior drilling supervisor, responsible for the company's offshore fields out of Morgan City. He passed away in 2003.*

As a young boy going to school, I was working in oil fields around the house on weekends and on holidays. I graduated in 1946 and went to work on a drilling rig that was in the neighborhood drilling shallow wells. It was a land job and we were drilling 2,600 feet wells. We had two derricks on one rig. When we were finished we would move over and tear that derrick down and build it back on the next location. We just built all of these shallow wells in Golden Meadow. That went on for two or three years. Then I went to work for Rowan Drilling Company which was an inland barge drilling wells out on Timbalier Bay for Gulf Oil Company. I stayed there awhile until I went to work for Texaco in 1952, I think. When I went to work for Texaco, it was on steam rigs. We were drilling in the lakes. There were several fields out of Houma—Dog Lake Field, Lake Barre Field, Bay Ste Elaine Field, and Caillou Island Field, which was the biggest then, and Leeville and Golden Meadow. Those were all the major fields that Texaco had. We worked in all of them.

*Did Texaco have its own rigs?*

Yes. We were working on their steam rigs. They started building power rigs and we had to work on it. The power rigs is run by diesel engines and the others were run by steam engines. You had the boilers that would make the steam. It was really economical to have steam when there was no sale for the gas. Once they started building pipelines and started putting in compressors and getting decent prices for the natural gas, then the steam wasn't used as much. It became uneconomical. Plus, they were more powerful rigs. We could drill faster and deeper with the power rigs. That was a big change in the oil field when they quit flaring the gas and started selling it. Actually, Texaco had got into a bind by signing a long term contract with LP and L. I don't know if you are familiar with that fiasco. It was 25 years for 25 cents. Then, gas got up to seven or eight dollars. But, we had to keep furnishing it for 25 cents. A few heads rolled for that. LP and L was Louisiana Power and Light Company. It is called Entergy now. Nobody knew because there was no sale for it before.

I started roughnecking, worked derricks, driller, toolpusher, supervisor, and I ended up retiring in 1987 as a senior drilling supervisor with Texaco. I was looking after offshore rigs at the Morgan City office. I enjoyed my time with them. I raised six children. I had a good life and a good retirement. I had six children—four boys and two girls. My oldest son is in the offshore towing business. One of my boys is an engineer for LOOP (Louisiana Offshore Oil Port). Another one of my boys is a shrimper and the other one is vice-president of a local bank. My two daughters

are school teachers... For a fellow that worked on salary for his whole life and never owned a business, I was satisfied. The oil field has changed a whole lot—the equipment that we used, the size of things, especially offshore, with the subsea completions and dynamic control vessels that don't even have anchors. It is something to see.

*Were those changes coming in when you were still working?*

Yes, when I was working offshore we had these floaters and one drillship that worked for us. We didn't use anchors. We had several periods in the 23 years that I worked where it slowed down but picked back up. If I remember correctly, when I started back in 1946, we were getting 90 cents a barrel for oil. I might not be exactly right, but it was somewhere in that neighborhood. They were making money then. But, we were only making 90 cents an hour working derricks. During the Suez crisis, when we had to close the Suez Canal, we had really boosted up production in the area. It probably hurt some of the big fields by producing these things, maybe even double up on the daily production. A lot of these sands, if you pull them too hard, they will go to water sooner than they would have. Then we had the time during '85, '86 when everything slowed down a whole lot. With the company, they kept the people and didn't lay anybody off. They put three or four toolpushers on each rig and sweated it out. I retired in 1987. When I retired with the company, they asked me to stay on as a consultant. I stayed on the same job working in the office in Morgan City. I worked another 14 months as a consultant.

*Who makes the decisions on how much to pump? Does that come from a main Texaco office or what?*

Yes. The state is involved in it somehow, especially on a higher gas:oil ratio wells. Unless you can pump the gas back into the sand, you are limited on the amount of fluid because of the high gas:oil ratio. They don't want you to waste that gas. The companies usually try to...it is to their own interest to keep that well going and get as much production as you can out of these sands that you are producing from. It is all very interesting how it all comes about. When I first started in the oil field...a big example is here in Golden Meadow...if you had a lot, it didn't matter if it was 50 by 50, you could drill two wells on it. They were yours. Until they came out with the spacing, where you had to have so many acres per well. That is why we had so many wells over here. We had derricks one on top of the other. But, everyone had their own lot and the company would come there and lease it and drill a well. Everybody wanted their own wells. It was money in those days.

*When did they go with the spacing?*

I would venture to guess in the late 1940's. I was just a hand working on the rigs and wasn't much involved in making decisions. It was the state that came up with that. What you had to do was lease and you would get a share of the well depending on how much of your property was involved in that spacing. Most of these leases, the landowners got one-eighth of the shares. A few that were smart enough to hold up and their property looked promising were able to get a quarter of it. What really started Texaco...I am sure you read of the Huey P. Long deal with Texaco. Huey was set on stopping Standard Oil from developing in Louisiana and he cut a deal with Texaco. Where we were drilling is on state property that Texaco had all the leases on.

They also had a lot of leases with LL&E, Louisiana Land and Exploration. That is what really started Texaco.

*When did LL&E get...they own a lot of property?*

From what I understand, now this is something I read, they got all of the land that the state owned. It was a hundred-year lease. They ended up with the royalties of everything. That is the way I was told. They owned all of the land. The state owned all of the bay bottoms and water bottoms when the oil developed down there. The oil companies had to lease from LL&E or the state. They were the ones who owned the most property. All of the fields in Leeville and Golden Meadow, all of that back property, was all LL&E.

*Getting back to when you were supervising the fields offshore, what were your main duties?*

My main duty was to stay on call should they have a problem that they needed to discuss with somebody. My duties were every morning...we had up to 16 rigs drilling in the Gulf...every morning I would call every rig and take the last 24-hour report. I would copy the report down and after doing this we would talk about what they would do during the day. We would go to the conference room with the engineers and the manager and different heads of different departments. Each one of us would give a discussion about what was going on. We would go over each rig report with the other guys. After that I would just try to keep ahead of what is coming up on each rig and be ready for them when they had to change orders or whatever. I would go to work at four in the morning and get off about five or six in the afternoon during the weekdays. During the weekends, I would stay at the apartment and I would call them from there. Then, I would call the report in to New Orleans. That was the thrust of my job as a senior drilling supervisor in Morgan City. I would work seven days on and seven days off.

*Would you come back here on your seven days off?*

On my seven off, yes. I had a furnished apartment over there and my wife would come with me. By the way, I lost my wife in February of 1990. She died of cancer. She was 70. We were married 51 years the day before she died.

*Did Texaco pretty much pull out of Morgan City?*

Yes, they still have the warehouse. They brought everything to New Orleans. As I understand, they are bringing everything to Houston now. Texaco was a major employer over here in this area. A lot of people worked with them. They were here a long time before the offshore business started. If I remember correctly, I believe it was in '38 or '39 that they changed to Leeville. In the late '20's or early '30's they started in the bays.

*They always mark 1947 when Kerr-McGee was drilling off of Morgan City as the beginning of offshore. Did people really perceive it as that?*

Yes, it was because they hadn't done anything before then. They might have had a couple of platforms with pilings in 10 or 15 feet of water near the shoreline. *Mr. Charlie* was a posting rig

and he could drill in about 20 feet of water. I am not sure what was his maximum depth. He was posting. In other words, he had a barge and it was posted on top of the barge to allow it to drill. The barge that we worked on were 10, 12 feet in depth and that is what we drilled in. That was your rig and everything was on the barge. We never drilled in anything that was more than seven or eight feet of water with these barges. When *Mr. Charlie* came out with this, they put it on a post and all of the equipment was above the barge and they could drill in deeper water. Then they came out with the ocean driller which was the first floater. My brother was the superintendent on that rig. That was my older brother. They could drill deeper. Before that they came out with the jackups where they had the rigs that could jack them up. Then they came out with the floaters. So, you had the posted rigs that go drill in 20 feet of water, the jackups could go into...the Gorilla jackups could go into 200, 250 feet, and the floaters could go 5000, 6000 feet of water. It started off where they could go where the jackups couldn't go. Depending on how much anchor chain they had, that determined at what depth they could drill.

*When did they start having living quarters on the rigs and platforms?*

Offshore, that was probably around *Mr. Charlie*'s time. Now, Texaco had camps. We would go from the camps to the rigs in the different fields. They had camps that could sleep 200, 300 people. They had all the living quarters and food there. The cooks would bring the food to the people on the rigs. We were working six on and six off when I first started. You would go to the camp. From the camp, you would drive a boat to the rig which would take about 5, 10 minutes. We would go make 12 hours on the rig and then go back to the camp for 12 hours. We would make our six days and come in. Then they went to 7 and 7. Most people were 7 and 7. They had the salary people also going 7 and 7. The only ones going 6 and 6 were the hourly people. It involved more days and transportation. I really can't tell you the biggest reason why they changed it or why it was 6 and 6 to begin with. It made for some weird weeks sometimes. You would get paid time and a half after 40 hours. The 6 and 6 would split the week up and sometimes you wouldn't get any overtime and sometimes you would.

*So, you worked out of the Morgan City office when you were supervising?*

In the office, yes.

*Did they have similar offices in other places?*

Yes. The Harvey District worked out of New Orleans. They had their own facility there. There was an office in Lafitte also. New Iberia District had an office. Morgan City was just the offshore. Houma was the main office for onshore. That is the area that I am familiar with, but they were in Texas and all over. I drilled some wells in Arkansas and in northern Louisiana. I worked as a company man because I was looking after contract rigs that was drilling for the company. I worked in what we call exploration, you know, wildcatting. I must of worked at least four years and never made a well in north Louisiana. It goes to show you the difference in the seismic work that they have. I understand now that four out of 10 are hit. Then it was one out of 10. I happened to be in the one that wouldn't hit for a long time. I must have drilled probably 20 or 25 wells. One I went to 24,000 feet. Another I went to 21 something. It took a year for the 24,000 foot one. We were after that Tuscaloosa sand. They were making big gas

producers there not far from where we were. Where our lease was at, it was wet. We found the sand, but it was deeper and it was wet... water and no oil. The way it works is you have the Tuscaloosa that comes up to the surface or wherever it is faulty is where your oil is struck. It is water dry.

*Your wells off Morgan City, were they federal or state?*

They were some of both. Chevron in Bay Marchand has some inside the three-mile limit and outside. I remember when the Chevron field was developed. They ran electricity offshore. They had electric rigs running off of Louisiana Power and Light. A friend of mine worked for those platforms. They ran the power to the platforms and they were real close. I don't really know how they did it. I remember it was amazing they had these rigs running and if lightning would strike, they would lose power and be in bad shape.

*Would Texaco use the same company to do all the contract jobs?*

No, they really split it up. They had a policy of trying to split up the work. There were a lot of contractors. I remember when I first started working, a lot of the jobs were by footage. They would pay so much a foot. Eventually, it all went to so much a day. I understand that they still have some of it being done. In fact, my nephew, my older brother's son, is a vice-president of Diamond Offshore and is in charge of the turnkey jobs. He bid on a job and you drill it at your own peril... You have a problem, it's yours. Whereas, the day-rate rigs, the company is responsible for those.

*Are the turnkeys more common now?*

No, not more common, but they are still in existence. Whereas, before they had a whole lot of it. They got to a time when there was hardly none. Everything was so much a day. What it was was when the demand for rigs was greater, they could name their terms. When things slacked off, if you wanted to try to get the job, you might bid on the turnkey job. You really had to know your area to bid on turnkey jobs.

*The drillers, would they do their own seismic work or the company would?*

The company would. They were the producers who owned the well. The company doesn't have any more rigs. I remember when Gulf had their own rigs, but not anymore. They got rid of all of them. The driller is usually the drilling company. A company that owns property that produces oil will hire the drilling contractor to come drill the well. They would pay them so much a day. There is hardly any producers left that own rigs. It is all done by contractors. It got to where it was cheaper. I know for a fact that major companies where the majority of the employees are union who have all of these fringe benefits and high salaries. Whereas, the contractor doesn't have this. Some have some fringe benefits but most don't.

*Is it hard getting a job with the producers?*

It was. After and during the war it wasn't that hard. When it got to the time I got there, they weren't hiring much. They wanted experienced people. I had seven years drilling and that is the reason I was able to get on. They like to hire somebody that somebody in the company knows. They didn't like to train somebody and have to lay them off. They wanted to be sure on who they were hiring. There is no way you could be 100 percent sure.

*Were most of the Texaco people local or were they hired from all over?*

When they first came down here, they had a mixture of people. At the beginning, roughnecks and roustabouts were local people. Eventually, the older guys retired and the younger guys learned the trade. Towards the late 1960's, I would say 80, 90 percent was local. Whereas, maybe only 15, 20 percent earlier.

*Back to when you were supervising out of the Morgan City office, the daily reports... what would they tell you?*

The first thing would be the depth—how deep you were. How many feet you drilled in the last 24 hours. Then, if you made a trip and changed a bit. Then, you had a mud report—mud weight, viscosity, and all of the properties of the mud. Also whatever other work you did. If you drilled 24 hours, then you put 24 hour drilling. But, if you drilled five hours and had seven hours of round trip to change bits, and so many hours of drilling again, you just describe that. If you had a problem, you had to put that down. The biggest problem in drilling a well is losing returns. This occurs when the mud that you are pumping in there fractures and won't come back to the surface. Then, a kick, when you go into a high pressure. Those are the two major concerns of drilling a well. That is why you have to program your casing depths to be able to keep your mud weight up high enough to hold back any high pressure sands without losing returns. The trick is how to get it right. When you are wildcatting, there is a lot of guessing on it. Once you drill a well and developed in the field, then you know where and how far you can go without setting casing and raising your mud weights.

*So, it would be the toolpusher on the rig that is making all the decisions?*

No, the petroleum engineers. They go over all of this data that they could accumulate and set up a casing program. They are not always right either. They will do it with the help of management. They have to get it okayed after they have drawn it up.

*Were there particular petroleum engineers that always got it right and got famous for doing that?*

Well, they had some who were better than others. They could come up with better explanations of why they are doing certain things. You had some who were real sharp and others who weren't. Texaco was lucky and had a lot of good employees. They made an effort to try and hire people. Really, you know it gets down to common sense. You have got to want it to work and educate yourself. The more effort you put in it, the better results you are going to get. I guess it is like that with anything though. I know it is in the route that I took. With engineers, I have seen them and I know.

*While you were working, did you get any formal training at various points in your career?*

Yes, we had a lot of schooling in different areas such as well control. This was a big thing. We had to go to a refresher course every year. Every five years you had to take the complete course and had to pass it. I worked on a lot of them.

*Did you ever have any major accidents, blowouts, or anything?*

Well, not a lot of kicks. None of them got away. I haven't witnessed a fatal accident to anybody. Probably the worst accident I've seen was one that happened to me. I was working for Rowan in 1950. We were drilling through cores at about 12,000 feet. The way this was done was you had a core vent and a core barrel. You would drop a barrel in there and you would drill 10 feet. Then you would go in there with your line and go down and retrieve that core. You would pull it out and knock the core out. Then, you would drop it again and drill 10 more feet. On this particular rig, it was a diesel electric. The engines and generator were on a different barge. So, you had your drawworks at the edge of the derrick and a huge electric motor that was about seven feet in diameter. Behind this, you had your sand reel. It went through the roof of the building. It went to a shield at the top of the derrick. It came back down inside the derrick pipe and we would go down inside of the drill pipe and retrieve the core. When the derrick man that was running the sand reel hit what we thought was bottom, the line piled up on top of the roof. After the sand line has been in use for a while, when it gets slack, it twists and make like an eye. You have to get this thing untwisted. You can't just pull it because you will break the line. So, I went on top of the roof and I was trying to get it untwisted. All of a sudden, that thing took off and caught me by these two fingers and this thumb in that eye. It picked me up 70 feet in the air, right below the monkey board, and I'm still hanging by these two fingers and thumb and I was about five feet away from the derrick. I can't reach the derrick; I'm just suspended there. I am afraid the thing would take off again and take my fingers off. One of my good friends that was working with us said, "Let's tie a chain onto it where it went into the drill pipe and pick it up with the block and get him down." So, they did that. When I got my hand out of that eye...that was close. That was really the worst accident I had. It wasn't good.

*Did it keep you out of work for a while after that?*

Well, I stayed off one week. You could see the tendons and bone on this finger, but this one was just bleeding. They just sewed it back together. It just doesn't go all the way back. Besides that it never bothered me. Then, they let me go back on the rig just to get my check. It was three weeks before I could go back in and handle the derrick. We really didn't have benefits then. If you didn't go, you didn't get anything. We had a compensation of about 20 dollars per week.

*Would the company cover hospitalization?*

No. Well, on accidents yes, but not personal. They paid all of this, but I just went to the doctor twice—once to get the stitch and once to get it removed.

*When you talk about kicks and controlling kicks, you are doing that again with the mud or is there other mechanisms?*

It is mud but what it is, you got a well that is coming in on you and you have to close your blowout preventers. The first thing you have to do is close your blowout preventers. Then, you read your pressures—how much pressure you've got on your drill pipe and how much pressure you've got on the casing. Then, you go through calculations to figure how much you have to weigh the mud out to control the bottom hole pressure that you've encountered. The trick is to circulate this thing without breaking it down and losing returns. When you took the kick, you had so much gas in the system so you have to get the gas out of it. You want to hold it to where you are not getting any more gas, but you can't overdo it because you end up losing return and end up with an underground blowout going from one sand to the other underneath. It is tricky, especially if you've got...you see, when you set the casing, you pressure up what you drilled out. You drill 50, 100 feet and then you come up and test this by putting so much pressure on it with a certain weight of mud. You keep going until it breaks down. Now, you know how much casing shoots from the hole. As you are drilling and raising the mud weight, you are getting nearer to the point that is going to determine when you are going to have to set your next string of casing. When you experience unexpected high pressure... So, the difference that you've got left between the mud weight and the hydrostatic weight of the mud column and what you see it held is what you have to work with to kill that well. You can't go over it because you will lose. That is what you go to study in all of that schooling that you get on this thing. Then, figuring out how much mud weight you have to come up on. All of that is what they teach you in school.

*When you come onto one of these, how much time do you have...*

The sooner you catch it the better off you are. If you don't catch it, that thing could get away from you. That is how it happens. The first indication is abnormal mud gain. You have a lot of things in your mud pit that will tell you the level—whether you are gaining or losing mud. It has happened when those things weren't working and someone wasn't watching and it got kicked. The problem is that you let too much of that gas come in. When it gets to the surface, depending on where your casing seat is at, it could break it down there. You lose returns. Those wells that you've heard of that blows and everything falls in the hole. That is what happens here, the well got away from them. It is coming on the outside of the casing and turns the land into mud. Everything just sinks. There was a big rig that was 54 feet wide and 150 feet long including the barge, equipment, and derrick. It was over 200 feet high. It all disappeared, I mean gone completely. [This was in] Caillou. Probably in the 60's. I drilled a well at Grosse Island near Abbeville. They showed me where one of those happened at—the rig, the Halliburton truck, and everything went down. Everything was on high land there. The gas, mud, and water just made a big pond there and everything went down.

*So, when does a well catch on fire? What happens?*

That is when...if you have a problem with your blowout preventers or something, like when you have a leak and you can't control it. It gets up to where it blows all of the mud and water out and it is gas coming out. Something, some spark, hits it somewhere and it burns. Usually, it is a

failure of the equipment that will cause that, blowout preventers or a leak in a line or something that can't be stopped. That is how you get the fire.

#### **4.4. Abraham Griffin (July 23, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*After several failed attempts to see Harrison Cheramie, Sr., proprietor of the Port Fourchon Marina/Motel, I drove down there on Saturday. Harrison was there, tending the bait shop he operates at the marina. He asked me who I had been talking to and who else was on my list, scoffed at most of the names (either they didn't know anything, or that they had crossed him over past Port Commission business), gave me some names but told me to start with his uncles, Abraham Griffin and his younger brother, Jarvis. These guys, Harrison said, actually worked their way up in the fields. So I called Abraham, 79 years old. He told me to meet him at his boat, tied up on the east bank of the bayou near the Yankee Canal. I met him there, and we went back to his house, about a block away. He had just returned from buying a gallon of paint. His wife was on the boat. Abraham told her to stir the can awhile, or just quit and come home. It was a hot afternoon, too hot to work on the boat – a Lafitte skiff he was preparing for the opening of the skimmer shrimp season in August.*

*Mr. Griffin quit school at 12 to work on a shrimp boat. He “retired” in 1985 after a life that intertwined contract drilling and shrimping. After that, he shrimped. While drilling, he worked for a number of contractors. He preferred the old steam rigs to the power ones – they were cleaner. He, like others, were involved in the 1938 shrimp strike that Glen Pitre recreated on film.*

When I was a young boy, I would work in a garage after school and on Saturday and Sunday. On Saturday and Sunday, I would get 75 cents per day. After school, I would get 15 cents per day. With my father, when I got a little bit older, we would make ice. Most of us would work in there from six in the evening until six in the morning. I was making two dollars a day and he was making two-twenty five. He was the fireman and the engineer. It was four-twenty five for both of us. We had a large family and it came in handy. At that time, there was eight of us. All together, we wound up having 10 children. When I got older, I started working on shrimp boats. I was 12 years old. I had to quit school to go to work to help raise the family... I got married October 12, 1940. It is almost 61 years. We had three children—a son, Vincent, and two daughters, the oldest, Marilyn Duet, and the baby, Mildred Collins. Then I went to work in the oil field for a man named Lewis Geer here in Golden Meadow. I was roughnecking for fifty cents per hour on oil rigs. From there, I worked my way up. At 24, I was a driller. I still kept shrimp boats in between there. I stayed in the oil field 43 years. I worked my way from roughnecking to production and drilling superintendent. In 1985, I retired. Now, I have just been fishing.

I never worked for a major company. I was always contract. At times, I worked for two different companies. I could take off and make my season. Whenever I would finish my shrimping season, I would go back to work. I did that through Williams Drilling Company in Baton Rouge and with Guidry's rig. Those people, whenever I needed a job, I would call them.

Whenever they needed help, they would call me. We got along pretty good. I still meet with Dick Guidry every morning. He had a couple of rigs and kept a lot of guys in business.

*Was most of your drilling in the marshes or on land?*

Right here in Golden Meadow in a lake. I worked in the east part of the state all the way to Lake Charles. I used to work all those places.

*Were you working offshore at all?*

Yes, I worked offshore for Chevron. In those days it was called California. I worked in Fourchon for them. I made a big mistake when I left them. I could have put in 43 years with them. We didn't know too much about retirement in those days. I was going where I could make more money at the time. I was making a dollar an hour there when I could be making a dollar twenty five on the big rigs.

*The rigs that Williams Drilling and Dick had, were they contracted out through...?*

Yes. Williams Drilling was contracted out to Humble Oil Company and Dick Guidry mostly to Texaco. I was a driller. The one over me was a toolpusher. I did that for a while—a toolpusher. I didn't like it too much. I would rather work 12 hours and have my 12 hours off. Not only that...Williams Drilling Company were after me to take a toolpushing job, but it was 200 dollars a month less. I couldn't do that. It was a relief pushing job. He would work 10 days on and 5 days off. I wasn't worried about the five days. I had a family to raise. I wanted to make the money. I couldn't take a 200 dollar cut. I was only making 300 a month. That was eight hours a day everyday. I would get to go home. You would get the crew to make double for you. You would get a day or two off. Then you could go home, then go back to work. A lot of jobs, when you are working for contractors, you are going from one place to another because you have to follow the rig around. I didn't like to quit a job so I would just follow it around. I worked for Lewis Roussel, I guess about 16 or 17 years ago. At that time, I was working for Charles O'Niell in this field right around here. I worked for him. I started with him in 1946. Then, I came back and worked for about 10 years drilling the wells and working them over. I left and went to work for Williams Drilling Company. Then, I came back and worked for the old man—Charles O'Niell. That was the last 10 years that I put in the oil field. I left in 1985. All together, off and on, I put in about 43 years.

*Charles O'Niell, is he from around here?*

No, he is from New Orleans. He is dead now. That is what they are doing now. All those rigs right there? It is just a lot of waste of money for them. That is just to create jobs. They make me sick just watching them. I don't think anybody knows what they are doing over there. They have been here for six months. I drilled all the wells and I worked them over so I know which is which. One day I walked over there and I asked the guy if they were having troubles. He said yes because they couldn't kill the well. I didn't see anything. I told him to give me three hours and I would kill it. They fooled around with that well for two weeks. He said every morning

they came back the well made 20, 30 barrels of oil. I said, "Well, why don't you put it in production?"

*So, when you traveled around from job to job, did the same crew go with you?*

Yes, most of the time. Very seldom you had to hire people from the town you went to. I always had a good crew of men. I worked with people from Mississippi and Breaux Bridge. Most of my crew was from this area. Lynn Oil Company started drilling right here. Carter was the head man and his brother, William Roddy Carter, was taking care of things down here. That was in 1946. In 1947 or 1948, they called me into New Orleans. Me and old Roddy Carter went down there. They offered me a lot of money, but they wanted to send me to Cuba. I couldn't take any crew. I had to hire the people from over there. I would work for 1,500 dollars a month. I would work 30 days on and 30 days off and get paid for 50 days. I had a wife and three kids over here so I said no. I didn't care how much money they would give me, I wasn't going there. I was raising a family and I would be too far away from them.

*Was it dangerous working on the rigs?*

Everything was done by hand. We didn't have the things that they have today. You had to do everything by yourself. I probably wouldn't know what to do if I went on a rig today. I would take a steam rig over a power rig any day. Most of the people today don't even know what a steam rig was. It is much cleaner. It has a lot of power. I was running a steam rig one time and I had...whenever you have four bars and you keep it on 350 pounds of dry steam, you have a lot of power. Every time you go to work, your clothes is all clean and fresh coffee all the time. We would steam clean everything. You would put water under a boiler and the steam comes up. You could get wet and dry steam. The drier it is, the better it is. If you get too much water in it, it will be soggy. You are losing power there. You have to keep certain levels of water in your boiler. If it is too full, it will be wet steam. If you keep it at that certain level, you will get dry steam. You can't let it run out of water because it is going to blow up. That is something that I used to do.

*Do you run these 24 hours a day, two shifts?*

Yes, 24 hours a day. In those days we had three crews so we had 8-hour shifts. Now, it came down to two shifts and 12-hour days. The most I ever made as a driller...when I started drilling in 1946, I started at a dollar fifty-seven an hour. Then, I drilled for different companies for 18 years. The most I ever made was three twenty-five an hour working for Dick Guidry.

*Why did they go to power rigs instead of steam rigs?*

I don't know. It was probably easier the whole way around. It is better in a way, but for old boys like me, we rather have the steam rigs. I've seen as many as 12 steam rigs running through town here. You could almost jump from one to the other.

*Did the oil run out here in Golden Meadow or is there still a little bit left?*

No, a man with money could come in this field right here and make a fortune. I took this over in 1972. They didn't have anybody to run it. They were down to 800 barrels a month. Three years after I took it over, I was selling 10,800 barrels a month—an increase of 10,000 barrels. I worked the wells over and put what was supposed to be in it. You see when you have...they had so many feet over there and they had gas valves in it. Then you have the wellhead pressure. For instance, if you have 500 pounds of pressure, you can't have over 500 pound valves because they will not open. That was most of the problem here. They had 480 pound valves and they never had that much pressure. What I had to do...we had two compressors. I got in touch with Rita Pump Company. They came out here and explained to me the way it worked. I had never worked them. I convinced the old man to let me fool around with the well that the compressor was in. I hooked both compressors on the line and put smaller valves in the well so that they would open. That is when I started getting production. I had Rita Pump put in this well and that was a big increase. It was a high water well. I think it was about 96 percent water. The more water you pull out of there, the more oil you are going to make. I was pumping 1500 gallons of water in 24 hours. I increased it to 2500. The pump is still in there. It went on for quite a while. The casing busted at 3000 feet. They didn't want me to fix it so we just let it go. Do you see all of these wells here? I drilled three gas wells on the west side of the bayou and five on this side. Every well you drill you have that little gas sand at 1,800, 2,000 feet. Some places it sits higher. The last 10 years I worked here, I drilled 21 wells.

*Is the Apache Company still drilling on land?*

Yes, they took over Texaco. They are making good. They are doing what is supposed to be done. It has got to where it wasn't big enough for Texaco anymore so they left. I was just talking to a friend of mine from Leeville. He was with Texaco and he transferred to Apache in Leeville. Right now they have two rigs drilling. They are making 800 barrels a day. If they want to spend the money they could make some oil. They are making some good wells over there. A lot of people don't understand...this field here is not dry. They still have at least 60, 70 percent of the original oil still down there. You have to pump it out.

For the last 10 years I put in over here, I bought around 20 pumping engines. For those little wells, it was only fifty-two hundred dollars apiece. That is not too much money and they are good forever if you take care of them. They sent a bunch of them to Oklahoma from here.

*What about your brother Jarvis? Was he working in the oil field at one time?*

Yes. He used to roughneck for me then he became a driller. We were six brothers. One was crippled and never worked. The other five were all drillers. I worked every one of them. Whenever they would come of age, I would put them to work. I am the oldest. He went into the service. When he came back he had been wounded in the leg. He was really bad off. He first came to work for me he couldn't stand up too long. One day he just passed out on the floor. We brought him into the tool house, laid him down, and covered him up. He was shivering. Old Man Roddy Carter was a pusher and he came by. I told him that anytime his brother felt bad, to let him lay down and rest. I know what he went through because I was there. They take good care of you, though.

*Did the war change a lot of things down here?*

No, but we lost a lot of young guys. I went for a physical and I was accepted into the Navy in 1941. My son had just been born. If they didn't call you in for induction within 90...after 90 days you had to have another physical. Ninety-two days after the first physical they called me again. I went to New Orleans for another physical examination and they turned me down. I will always remember. The doctor checked my heart and he said he was sending me back home because I had a heart murmur. He advised me to see a heart doctor. The next day I went to the doctor that he recommended. I never had any problems with it though. They put me on a pacemaker but I don't need it anymore. I still have it in me, but it is set low. If my heart gets bad, then it will kick in. I can work and it doesn't bother me.

#### **4.5. Dick Guidry (October 4, 2001; Galliano, LA)**

I was 16 when the war ended. When I was going to fish crabs on the beach in Grand Isle in 1942, there was a big German torpedo on the beach that had missed a ship the night before. They used to sink ships, oh at least once a week they used to sink them offshore. And I went to get my dad, went to the Coast Guard, and they came, and they guarded all the area, removed the detonator and brought it to New Orleans. Big torpedo, about 18 feet long. Swastika on the tip.

*What made you decide to go start drilling?*

Well, I figured anybody could do it. I mean it's just a matter of borrowing the money and doing it. And I guess the banks had enough faith. I had a few investors to help me start it. The first thing I did is I went to several of the major companies and talked to them, and I saw that there was a need for a rig that could drill to about 10 thousand feet, but could work over a 15, 18 thousand foot well. So what I did, there were a lot of little workover rigs but they could only handle, maybe eight, nine thousand feet, the earlier wells, but the newer wells, there were really no rigs built to handle the heavy stuff. Then, the drilling rigs could do it, but they hated to put a very expensive rig to work over secondary recovery. So I saw the need... so I built a real heavy duty workover. And I saw there was a need, so I went to Bethlehem Steel, and they financed...I bought the barge, and they financed all of the derrick, the drawworks, the pumps, everything I needed to make a rig work. Generators. And I went to Reagan Equipment in Morgan City, there's a shipyard, and that's where they put it together for me. It cost about 800 thousand I think at the time. Today that same rig would cost you about four million. We floated it to location. Working for Texaco, working for Shell, Exxon and Chevron. Whatever you could hustle.

*Okay, you were getting your equipment when you were working for Texaco and Chevron. Did they have the people down here that you would go negotiate with?*

No, no. We had to negotiate at the home office in New Orleans for Texaco. The division office. But the superintendents were local. What you'd do is you'd go sign a general contract. Then you were supposed to sign an amendment to the general contractor on a per well basis, so you'd know whether the land owner was Louisiana Land and Exploration or La Terre or Cheramie so that they could credit, I mean debit that particular well. Make that and pay for that portion of the

workover. I'll give you an example. Two years, three years after I sold the rigs, the vice president of Texaco called me, asked me if I could have two or three days with nothing to do. He needed my help at the site. We had not signed an addendum to a contract in 25 years. When I got there, there was a room bigger than this, with stacks that you could barely walk around this high of contracts that had to be signed in six different places. And I sat down for three days and signed contracts for 25 years worth of work. And I could not believe...I said, "What are you going to do, Jimmy? You going to send that to a warehouse in New York and nobody's ever going to look at it again?" He said, "That's exactly what's going to happen." But that's what the numbers crunchers wanted. Make it all legal. I said, "Jimmy, I've done the work. I've been paid, what's the deal?" "Well, we just forgot to do those addendums. We've got to do them." So they had to reconstruct 25 years of work. But now with computers I'm sure it's a lot easier. Then you had to type each one of them.

*So you had a general contract to work for Texaco, and they would just notify you and say, "We need you on this location" and...?*

That's right. See, if I just work in the back of Golden Meadow, that had to be charged to the Golden Meadow field. They moved me to Terrebonne Bay, well then I had to go to Terrebonne Bay. But then not only on Terrebonne Bay, but on whose property? It could be LL&E, could be the state of Louisiana, it could be anybody. There were different leases in the same general oil field.

*At that time, was it hard keeping your rig working?*

We had a lot of dry spells. Every time there was a slight recession, the first work that we would cut out would be the...in other words, the workover business in the oil field has always been treated like stepchildren. They didn't care what they spent to find new oil. But once they found it, they'd starve you to death. A drilling rig would get 10 times a day what we'd get for workover doing the same kind of work. Because, they had to tighten their belts once they found production. And they still do that today, by the way. If you're in the remedial end of it, you get screwed, but if you're in the drilling end of it, money's no object.

*So even though they needed you to be there...*

Oh, they needed you, but they just...and it's not like it has to be done. I mean, they can wait, the well's dead. It flowed with the price of oil. If the price of oil would go up, they could have used 20 rigs, but when oil was down, they wouldn't want you for free. But I managed to keep busy. I've survived every recession.

*Okay. Now you mentioned Bass Enterprises. When did they come in down here?*

Oh, they've been in Louisiana since the early 1900's. That was Sid Richardson. Sid Richardson died, and he was the richest man in the world for a while, you know. And then when he passed away, Perry Bass took over, it was his nephew. Sid Richardson had no children. And then it became Bass Enterprises. As a matter of fact, some years back I went with the president of Bass Enterprises, and I went to Justin Keating in Ireland, and I got him a hundred thousand acres in

the Celtic Sea. Concessions. And they never drilled it. Gulf Oil drilled it, when they dropped the lease. Gulf Oil leased it and they made a hell of a field out of it. Art Hamilton was the president of Bass Enterprises. They're in Fort Worth.

*Were there other companies back then besides the majors?*

Yeah, well, there was John Mecom. Mecom had Lake Washington. Actually he had the deepest well in the world for about 20 years. Twenty-three thousand feet in Lake Washington. I think it was a quadruple completion. He was producing out of four zones out of the same hole...and let's see...you had many independents. Harold Callais owned the cable company. He drowned recently. He owned the cable company and he had sold some of his accounts. He had made 18 million in Terrebonne Parish and he asked me, he said, "Where can I make as much money as I'm making in the cable business?" And I said, "Oil. Drilling oil wells." He says, "Well, I don't know anything about drilling oil wells," he says, but he said, "Dick, you can drill some wells." He says, "If I form a company, would you be president?" I said, "Sure." So we started that. In two years I drilled seven wells. Four miles from AMOCO, four miles from Texaco. He was taking in 980 thousand a month from five million dollars of investment. And he decided that he became an expert in the oil and gas business, and he went behind my back and told the gaugers to open them up, he wanted to see how much he could do. I said, "Harold, you're going to kill them all." In three days, he killed the whole thing. I said, "Man, you don't need me." So I quit, and that was the end of Harold Oil and Gas. It would have cost half a million or more just to rework them. But he had wells that would have lasted 25, 30 years if he would have left them alone. But he had a hard head, hard head. He drowned, what, about three months ago? I have a condo that he agreed to buy for 400 thousand. He agreed to buy the day before he was going scuba diving. He drowned the next day. We were supposed to meet Monday to close the deal. Incidentally, the bank that he owned, I sold to him. I used to own that bank. Community Bank. I bought that from American Bank in... oh jeez, I might not even remember when I bought that. But when I went broke in '85, I lost everything. And the bank was strong. When I left it, it had survived the recession. We, I left it in great shape. It's still strong today. You saw that new branch they just built? Beautiful.

I kept the drilling company 25 years. And I kept the boat business from 1964 to '85. But out of that whole time, I was in the Legislature 16 years. I was into the Legislature '52 to '56, and then '64 to...Earl Long beat me in '68, '58. I went wildcatting in Kentucky, and when I came back in '64, of course I just commuted back and forth, and in '64 I ran for the Legislature again and stayed another 12 years. I was under John McKeithen for eight years and under Edward Edwards for four years.

*So what made you decide to go for Legislature?*

Because Harvey Peltier, who I ran against in '51, his father had been bragging that he would be elected at 26, I figured if he'd be elected at 26, I could be elected at 21. And people heard me say that and took me up on it. I had 14 opponents. I was the most surprised person in the race when I won. My wife couldn't vote for me, she was 19, I was 21. Won by a landslide, 17 votes. That was good for four years. But then after that, I won the first primary for three elections.

*So in that first session, is there anything memorable about your first period in the Legislature? You were a kid.*

I was a kid, but the first thing that impressed me was the bonus money should have been kept, our income today had to be kept. I got legislative council, that's Hank Lauricelle, to check into it, and they said that if my bill had passed, and if they had lived by the provisions of the bill, we would have four billion of recurring revenues per year. They could've invested in Standard and Poor and picked up double the money every six years, 11 percent, that doubles your money every six years. Now you figure from 1952 to today, when you have about five or six billion in about four years that you could have rolled over. Anyway the legislative council said that the recurring revenue would be about four billion a year today. But 21, who listens to anybody. But then in '64 I was extremely, extremely vocal and that's when I built all these levees. That's where we got 50 million dollars worth of levees that are finished, while people are just talking about them today. We're ready for them. And with [Albert Otto] Rappelet we got that port going. And our biggest problem we've had, probably getting decent highways. And...like the Leeville bridge, I had that built, but we couldn't justify going higher than that because there was no port at the time, and it went to Grand Isle, there was only 15 hundred people, you couldn't economically justify...because each additional foot higher you'd go up, it needed to go 45 feet higher, that was 400 thousand more per foot, as you go up, so it would have cost several million more. We couldn't justify it.

It was obsolete the day we built it. We knew that. But we couldn't...they had a formula they went by. So many population, you couldn't...and the oil and gas business was not really in full bloom offshore. I mean it was sporadic here and there, but nothing to really...and most of them were in Leeville anyway. And they were transient people that didn't live there. They lived on high ground, so they weren't too concerned about it. But anyway that's just one of the many problems we've had.

*Were people anticipating offshore oil doing what it did yet at that point?*

Not really, it just happened. There was no big fanfare about it, it just...they branched out and of course some of the predictions of hurricanes were going to wipe them out all the time, which it does, but they rebuild. But what they do today is unbelievable. I'll never forget, I was fishing with Judge Perez in Plaquemines Parish. And Harry Truman, he met with Harry Truman and Earl Long for a request to try to get offshore settlements for the income. And I asked him, I said, "How come you didn't make a deal with Harry Truman?" I said, "Harry Truman is offering you 37 and a half percent. Where the water hits the beach outward forever...why didn't you accept that?" He said, "Dick, you see that ship at Ostrica?" which is about three miles away. I said, "Yeah." He said, "It's unloading 80 cent crude from Saudi Arabia." Said, "You see that structure in Black Bay? I mean, in East Bay? That's Chevron producing oil at three dollars a barrel. And that oil is costing them eight dollars a barrel to get out of the ground. They will never, never, ever in our lifetime, make money offshore. That's why I did not accept the 37 and a half percent." Because we were having 100 percent up to three miles, you see, at the time. So to show you how wrong he was, do you realize the money that we would be making with 37 and a half percent? Truman gave him a hell of a deal. And he spoke for Louisiana on behalf of Earl Long and he was the authority. And his logic was reasonable. Of course, he lived in

Plaquemines and he knew how treacherous the Gulf of Mexico could be. Never dreamed that offshore would operate at a profit when you can't operate at a profit in a bay. That was his theory. He was wrong. He was a powerful individual, that guy.

#### **4.6. Mac Rome (September 22, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)**

I graduated in 1944, and I went in the service at 17, volunteered to go in the Navy. Of course, it was towards the end of the war. Got out at the latter part of '45 so I didn't serve much time in it, you know, very fortunate. I couldn't go to work for Texaco. I still wasn't 21. So I worked I think for Gulf Distributorship for a while. Drivin' a truck, drillin' and gas. And then at 21 I went to work Texaco and I stayed 40 years. I stayed 25 years at Leeville, and then they moved me up to Golden Meadow here and made me field production foreman here in Golden Meadow. And after, say maybe five years, they made me field superintendent of both fields. At one time, I had about 96 people workin' for us. We drilled many a well here in Golden Meadow, too. Because in Golden Meadow I think they started, I wasn't here, I think around '30, like maybe '36, '37...They drilled here in Golden Meadow before Leeville, I think. But this was all considered inshore. Now when I first started for Texaco, when I was in Leeville, they brought a rig in at Grand Isle, off of Grand Isle. And they took one of our crew, one of our roustabout crew, and went to Grand Isle and we stayed at Grand Isle awhile riggin' up that rig and then layin' a gas line to it for supply. But that was the only rig, the only well they'd be drilling right there then. Then they didn't make a well, we didn't make a well, we had a dry hole. And they moved outta Grand Isle for quite a number of years then. We pulled back in here. I had the Golden Meadow, the Leeville, and the Bayou Ferblanc field, three fields. Bayou Ferblanc is on the east side of the Bayou, between Golden Meadow and Leeville. I'd love to see how offshore is done, but I don't wanna go do it. I don't wanna go see it. You know what I mean? That wasn't for me. Didn't like it, you know. I stayed inshore all the time. I was very lucky. And here in Golden Meadow, I was 7 and 7. I was the boss and I'd come home every night. So there was gravy train, man.

When we first started, most of our rigs was land rigs. But we'd dig a canal to get there and they'd put these mats in this marsh and stuff to put the rig on. The pipe's all under that marsh to run gas lines to operate the rigs, and they were right behind the dredge, I mean it was this soft mud that'd sink up to here. But there they were. And if you didn't do it, there was somebody else on the bank lookin' for your job in those days, you know, there was, there were quite a demand. I was very lucky to get on in '48. And, eventually, I'd say maybe, oh, around '50 they start comin' out with the barges. The rigs on the barges were just locked in the barge. And then they'd dredge the canal and then the pile driver would come in and drive the location where the well's gonna be, and then they'd slip the barge on and sink it. And then they'd drill the well, complete the well and pump it out and move off, and then we would take over and run the flow line. Run in the tank battery and produce the oil.

We had what they called pumbers. Pumbers would handle the production of it, in other words they'd gauge the tanks, they'd gauge the wells, and they'd turn that in to Bruce Pagliughi, who would figure out how much production we needed per day, how much gas we sold. And then we'd have... say a well drops off a little bit, we had to have what we call Otis Wireline Service,

they'd come in and maybe run a line on it, see if we were buildin' up with sand. If we had a little bit of sand buildup, we'd try to bail it out. We'd clear out the perforations, and the well would come back for a while. But in south Louisiana we got a water drive here. In other words, they got some helluva water drives. Below and above the sand is where the oil sits. And if you get a little greedy, you're producing a good oil well, say about 200 barrels a day and you get a little greedy and you want to get a little bit more oil, well, you bring the pressure in the oil sand down. You're drawin' it down. Well, if you draw it down below the pressure of the water sand above it or below it, that water's comin' in. And when that water comes in, it pushes that oil back, and the more you open it up the more water you're gonna make. If you would cut it back, you'd have less water and more oil. But the higher ups want it all. We had a boss, I'm not gonna give you his name, but he always said, "Get as much oil as you can because tomorrow they might invent something to take the place of oil." So we'd pull, we'd pull the hell out of those wells. And we made a lot of wells. I mean, Leeville at one time I think we had as high as about 38 thousand barrels of oil a day. I'd say we drilled over the course of my time there, I'd say we had 350, 400 wells drilt. Not all producing at one time. They'd go bad and then we'd drill another one then we'd work it over. You can work it over once or twice and still get a little bit of oil out of it. But in those days, you gotta remember, oil was sellin' for three dollars a barrel. So, we made, when I started with Texaco, I started at 87 cents an hour. And I ended up production foreman of the Leeville field. From '48 I stayed 25 years.

Had a lot of problems, lot of worries, but you know how they say that the buck would stop there, you know. The pumpers would come in in the afternoon and tell you the problems and then they'd go on home. And you gotta worry about the problem for the next morning. But it was a good job. Of course, in those days, Texaco was Texaco. They had a lot of company loyalty to the employees and a lot of employees loyal to the company. [Then] Texaco pulled out of Morgan City. They pulled out of Houma. Most of my time was outta Houma. And our district was in Houma. Our bosses was in Houma. They pull outta Houma, pull outta Morgan City, pull outta Harvey. Just gave it all up. Now this field here now belongs to Apache Oil Company, they bought it. To show you the difference, Golden Meadow right now got two employees, just two. Of course, when they bought it I think it was 400 barrels a day. And now they're up to about 14, 16 hundred barrels a day. With two employees. Just shows you the difference. I can see the company's way. I mean, when we were there, we had good savings plan, good insurance, good pension. And that all costs money, where if you can get rid of all of us and save money, just hire a contractor when you need 'em, and that's what everybody went to. But I always say you only get what you pay for. Right now a roustabout at Texaco makes about 17, 18 dollars an hour. A roustabout with a contractor might make seven or eight dollars an hour. [Contracting] happened, I would say, in the last 10 years. Somebody come up with the bright idea how much they could save, and they did save. But you get the class of work that you pay for, you know. If a contractor saw something wrong with that shift, if you didn't tell him to fix it, he didn't fix it. It's a different oil field now, I tell you, altogether different. Of course, they treated me well. When I retired, I was taken care of real well. Merrill-Lynch is not doin' me no good right now though. Whew, boy we took a lickin', I'll tell you. Of course, everybody did, you know? Everybody.

I retired in January of '87... Then I come back to work and kinda took it easy, and when they come up with the incentive to... they wanted to eliminate some people and they offered

incentives to the ones who had enough time. So I said, well, this is a good time to go. So I did. I left in January of '87. My wife died in '94. And I married, it's gonna be two years in November, my childhood sweetheart. We went to school together and we finished school in 1944. She went to college, became a teacher, and I went in the Navy. She met her husband, they got married and had four kids. And I came back from the Navy and met my wife. In fact, we graduated together, my wife and I. And we had two kids. And her husband died about eight years ago and my wife seven years ago. But she was livin' in Cut Off, not too far from us. We knew each other. In fact, she was my sister-in-law. Her sister was married to my brother. It's a close knitted deal.

*Where were you in the service?*

I was very fortunate. I went towards the end. I took my boot camp in San Diego. And then from there they sent me to Seattle, Washington. We was stationed at Pier 90. I was drivin' these little landing crafts. And the war was comin' to the end. When we were there, we'd handle the Liberty crews from the Maritime Union, you know, the ships would come in, we'd take 'em back to shore. And then the war ended. So I'm gonna tell you what we did and you gonna think it's not possible, but all we did then in Seattle Harbor, a troop ship would come in and they might have 20 of these little landing crafts on it. They'd lower 'em in the water, we'd go get 'em and we'd tow 'em to the dock. And at the dock we'd take only the compass off. Because they had alcohol in 'em, but most of it was dry, they'd already stole the alcohol. On our boat we had cuttin' torches. We'd go out in the middle of Puget Sound and we'd cut holes in the boat. Never take the engine, nothing, out. And sink 'em. We sunk hundreds of 'em out there. We never could figure out why until one day I read an article and I could understand why. They figured if they'd bring all them boats in and unload them, them General Motor engines, then General Motors wouldn't make another engine for another 10 years. So rather than knock the economy down, they just figured they'd get rid of that and let 'em continue. That's what it is, 'cause there ain't no tellin' what we buried overseas, you know, not to bring back.

And we had some guys sittin' on the end of the dock cuttin' shoes in half, cuttin' shoes, all day long cuttin' shoes and getting rid of 'em. It was just such a circus, you know. Everybody was geared up for the war and everything was bein' made. And if they'd have put that on the market, it'll flood the market and then the companies couldn't make anything and then they'd be out of business for quite a while.

*So then you came back and Texaco was already drillin' in the area?*

Oh yeah. When I come back in '45, I couldn't go to work for 'em until '48. But they were drillin', they were workin', ole' Pep William and them. Pep was there. Pep was older than me. Pep was a driller on a rig for Texaco and then he ended up bein' a field foreman, a production foreman.

*You said it was kinda hard getting on with Texaco... 'cause they were bringin' their own people in or...?*

Well, no. The trouble is that they just had so many people lookin' for jobs. In '48, they just had people lookin' for jobs all over...and then, when I hired out they must've been a line of 50 of 'em. Waitin', lookin' for jobs, you know. So you didn't turn down doin' something because there was somebody else waitin' to take your job. But now it's altogether different. They're so damn scarce of employees right now they don't know what to do. There's people sayin' they don't have work. You pick up that paper and see how many jobs are open if you wanna work. One of the biggest problems down here is they can't pass the piss test. Most of the young kids can't pass it and they won't hire 'em. But you see, them companies are pretty strict. If you got a boat workin' for 'em and you got a man on dope on 'em, not only the man loses, the boat loses. So these companies are not gonna take a chance. They got random drug testin' and you gotta pass a drug test to go to work for 'em. And we got oodles of young kids can go to work, but they can't. So they hire all these contractors. Let them worry about it. So it's not a healthy situation. But you can't tell 'em that when they're young, you know. They know everything. You remember when you were young and knew everything, your daddy didn't know shit? You notice that? But you know something, the older you get, the smarter your daddy was. You notice that? I tell that to my boys every now and then. 'Course I got two good kids. My oldest son is an assistant principal at Lafourche Junior High. And my youngest son lives here. He has one little girl. And he works for Texaco. I had just two boys. Five grandkids, four girls and one boy. One boy's just right if they start draftin', he's 21 years old. He's goin' to Louisiana Tech, he's in chemical engineering. He's got one more year to go. But, I hope they don't start draftin'. But you never know. We don't know what this thing gonna do. Or how big it's gonna get or what, you know.

*Well, if you can tell me a little bit more about the Texaco operation. They've got these different districts. Do production orders come down from those central offices?*

In my day, the decision whether we were gonna drill came out of the New Orleans office. It came to Houma, which was my district. And Houma would then get the surveyors out. They'd go out and start surveyin' the marsh and see exactly where the location is...cause the geologist determined where they wanted to drill at. And then we'd mark it with flags. And then we'd get a dredge in, 'cause 90 percent of our wells were dredged. That's what's the ruination of all this marsh right now because all of it would be dredged. But we'd dredge a location and then we'd bring in a little pile driver, plain old pile driver, they'd drive the location. Then we'd put the rig on it and drill the well. Now, the Houma office would send engineers out to see the well logs, to see whether we justified settin' the casing, if we got a good enough well or not. And they would determine where we gonna perforate. We would perforate by their orders. The engineers from the Houma office would determine if the perforations should be at 10,500 to 540 or whatever it is. And then we'd do that out in the field. We needed to use Schlumberger and Atlas. And they would do the perforating. And then we'd bring the well in and if the well came in good producin' then Houma would decide what we gonna pull it at.

We'd take gauges of different size chokes. To see how much oil it would make on a one-eighth, on a three-sixteenth, you know. And then they'd determine what we'd take the pressures on the wells. Let's say you got 15 hundred pounds on [the well] and you open it up on a one-eighth, and you're pullin' 150 barrels on a one-eighth and the pressure drops down to 13 hundred. Well, if you close it in and it goes right back to 15 hundred, you're not doin' no harm to the well. But

if you pull it on a three-sixteenths and it's 15 hundred and you pull it down to 12 hundred and then you close it in and it goes back on up to 14 hundred, well, you're drawin' down greater than what the reservoir should pull. So then normally we would go back to the one-eighth. So we get the most oil out before we get water. We know we gonna get water. It's not like Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia doesn't have no water drive, period. It's all oil drive. So they can pull 'em wide open. And offshore, too, they pull 'em wide open 'cause they don't have as big a water drive. But here, if you get greedy, you gonna get water. And water gives you problems. You gotta treat water. You gotta separate the water from the oil and the gas. And you gotta treat the water. At one time, for quite a number of years, that water went overboard. And we had more oysters, more shrimp, more fish than we ever had in our life. Then the environmentalists came and said that we were polluting the water. So we had to start treating the water...which doubled the cost. You gotta put chemical in that water, you gotta treat it and everything before it goes overboard. Now you can't even go overboard with it. Now you have to put it in barges. At one time everything went overboard. I remember when we first started. You'd break the well in, you'd open the well up, and you'd start makin' water. We'd let that go overboard. When it started makin' a little oil, you'd let it go overboard, you just let it go overboard till it clears up. Gets to all oil, then you shut it up, you put in the line. But that oil and stuff went out in the water. But it dissipated, you know. I mean, it didn't kill nothing.

Just like the environmentalists say, you gotta pick up the oil in the marsh, you can't burn it. If you get a leak today in that marsh and you set fire to it, you will burn 99 and nine-tenths of it. And within three weeks, you got some green grass growin' back in the marsh. But if you leave it there and let it get dead and try to pick it up, you're not gonna pick up half of it. It's gonna stay there. But they won't let you burn. We all used to kid all the time, if they had a crew of Coonasses on the *[Exxon] Valdez* and they'd have set fire to the ship, it wouldn't have cost them billions of dollars. They let that stuff get on the bank and...you see, once oil gets out and the gas works out of it, then it won't burn very much. It's the gas that makes it burn. So when it's live, you burn it, you gonna get rid of 99 percent of it. But you can't fight them, the environmentalists, you know.

They don't care. They don't give a shit what it cost you to do it, you gotta do it. And that's why we moved out of a lot of wells, why we abandoned a lot of wells, because it was too expensive to try and produce it according to the environmentalists. So we'd plug it and abandon it. We'd pull the casing and everything else and cement 'em off. So, there was a lot of wells that we could have continued producing, if we coulda gone overboard with the water. But treating the water and everything else made it... in other words, they didn't pay you to get three dollars a barrel and then spend two seventy-five to produce it, you know. So they decided to just get rid of it.

*When did these regulations come into effect?*

In about '65. Then we started goin' in the tanks with it and then goin' overboard treatin' it. But now, it must be at least ten years, ten, twelve years that we gotta move it out. We can't let it go overboard period. We gotta pump it down the hole. And to pump water down the hole, you can't let oxygen hit the water. If any oxygen hit that water, then you gonna pump it down the hole, bacteria gonna form and it's gonna plug your formation. And you gotta acidize it, clean it

out. So, you gotta have a set of tanks with gas on top of it. You gotta produce it from the well, into the tank. If you let the oxygen hit it, it's gonna plug up your well. And it costs you. You get Dow Chemical Company to pump acid down your hole. Eat up all that damn stuff again. And start all over again. That's where the cost comes in. See up there in Larose, over to Bourg? Well, you saw them pits and stuff they got on the side? Most of that is salt water. Salt water, you know, brine water that we produce. And they put it out there, and it, they let the sun work it and everything else. And they keep it churning up and eventually it'll go down in the ground. And any oil, they'll skim it off. But then all that dirt that you notice, well environmentalists say you can't do nothin' with it. They're just stacked there and nobody can use it. It's got chemicals. You see, at one time, we'd pull pipe outta the well and use the pipe for something else and everything else. Now they tell you it's radioactive and everything else. You can't even do nothin' with it. You gotta get rid of it. Period. Separators, we used to move one separator to another place. But no, not no more. Once you move that separator you gotta get rid of it. 'Cause it's... I don't know...

Eventually it got expensive, and then it got uneconomical. And that's when we started [shutting] in wells. And then when they saw the production was going down bad in Golden Meadows, they wanted to sell. But no other company would buy 'em with 300 wells and only 50 producing, and all the rest closed in. Whoever buys 'em is gotta abandon those wells. So Texaco went ahead and we abandoned. We abandoned at least 300 back here. We plugged and abandoned all the pits, before we could sell it, because Apache couldn't afford to abandon all that stuff. Now, what they bought now, they're responsible for.

Then we did the same thing at Leeville and they did it at Caillou, they did it at a lot of places. They had to abandon all the wells ...and then you see, well, it's the state's problem. The state comes up to help the little guy. There's a lot of wells closed in that could be produced.

So either you work it over within six months and produce it or you abandon it. So when we abandon it, the state gets no more...as long as we had a well, whether you're producing it or not, the state was getting' taxes for it. But when we pull it out, the state doesn't get any more taxes. So they cut their own throat. You follow what I'm talkin' about? In other words, there was wells that just did not justify workin' over. And so we had to abandon, plug 'em in and abandon 'em. And that becomes expensive. But, that's what we done. In the Houma District, Texaco mighta abandoned, I'd say, two or three thousand wells that were drilled. Now it would pay to produce 'em. At 25 and 26 dollars a barrel. Seven, eight, 10 barrels a day you could justify it. But at three dollars a barrel you couldn't, you know. We abandoned 'em all.

*I was here a couple months ago and the EPA or somebody was down here cleanin' up...*

Pluggin' em, yeah, yeah. This guy O'Niell...I think they had 40 some wells they had to plug and abandon. He went bankrupt. He bled the thing dry and then went bankrupt. But I blame the state. They knew it was comin', they coulda made him clean 'em as he went. But no, they just let him go completely bankrupt. And, I found out, I think there's a fund. The oil companies kick in so much money to this fund, and then the federal bureau. Man, they spend some money to clean that stuff out. They spend millions all across the bayou. And they didn't go half-assed,

you know. And the government pays, they got some people on the payroll. But, they clean out that whole side over there.

Well, they got a guy by the name of Abraham. Abraham, you know Abraham? Well, we blame that all on him 'cause he produced them damn wells over there. Abraham. Yeah. We kid him, we kid him that old man O'Niell thought he owned 50 wells and he pulled a Christmas tree off 50 of 'em they didn't have no pipe in 'em. Abraham had sold all the pipe out of 'em. He's a good guy, though. Good, good, good fellow. Oh, yeah. He has a lot of knowledge, had a lot of knowledge. Lots of knowledge. Because the companies he worked with, you know, like O'Niell and stuff, money was not that easy. You know what I mean? You had to make do with certain things. Where us with Texaco, money was no object. When we needed something, we bought it, you know. And they paid for it. But his experience and his knowledge, using second-hand stuff and everything else... was a lot greater than ours. Because, if we had an old well and we didn't like it, we just buy another one. He'd try to re-tap, try to make it work. That's the difference.

O'Niell was from New Orleans. He was a lawyer. A shrewd operator. And he came down here and he took over and he drilled most of them wells. They were all shallow wells. I think Abraham would tell you, what, they were around twenty five hundred, three thousand, something like that. But he was a shrewd operator. And made money. He made money for them people, too, at one time. All them land owners made money. Of course, he makes more. In those days you'd sign a lease, one-eighth. Every eight barrels, you get one. He'd get seven.

## 5. BOAT COMPANIES ALONG THE BAYOU

Boat companies, like contract drillers, are locked in an unending dance with the oil companies -- the megmajors, the majors, and the independents who have the capital to explore for hydrocarbons, commission wells, produce oil and gas if those wells strike reservoirs. The stakes are high. When times are good, when prices for crude oil and feedstocks of natural gas are high, the oil companies may offer relatively long-term contracts to boat owners, assuring that a specific boat will be available for a specific job. The oil companies, if they think that the price structure will last for a while, may even commission a "new-build," designed to the company's exacting specifications. Most of the time, boats work on a day-rate basis, a fixed price for the duration of a specific job. A surplus of boats to be hired out benefits the oil companies. Day rates go down and boat companies will be pitted against each other to win the available jobs. The boat companies are then faced with a difficult choice -- to maintain their fleets in working order, awaiting an upturn in activity and rates, or to mothball some of their vessels and hope that other companies will do likewise. They will lose potential jobs for the now-idled vessels, but they will begin to tip the balance between boats and jobs back into their favor. Day rates will rise, the fleet will be operating at capacity, and the boat owners and investors will turn a very good profit.

This dance has been performed along the Gulf of Mexico for decades. When oil exploration first began to move offshore after World War II, however, conditions were different. Few fast boats were available to move men quickly out to the rigs and return them to shore after a week-long shift. There were few tug boats and push boats to move bargeloads of supplies down to staging areas near open water. No specialized supply boats were available to transport these materials out to platforms and rigs. There were, however, some local entrepreneurs with visions. Otto Candies owned only a couple of boats himself, but he knew where to find people with fishing boats that could be adapted to the needs of the developing offshore oil industry. When Humble Oil located its regional headquarters on Grand Isle in the late 1940's, it went to Candies to procure the vessels needed to carry out its offshore activities. Candies in turn went to fishermen he knew along the bayous, some still speaking only French, and made the arrangements. As the middleman, Candies did the bookkeeping and distributed the rental monies and crew's wages to the boat operators. And he encouraged local men to build new boats.

Edison Chouest, a shrimper from Galliano on Bayou Lafourche, got into the oil-boat business early on, though he was by no means the first. Mr. Web Callais and his siblings, several of the Cheramies, the Theriots, and others with fishing backgrounds from the bayous, started to build up fleets, buying some old boats, building new ones, selling and upgrading to larger and more powerful craft. Financing was available from local and regional banks and from engine manufacturers who would underwrite the cost of a boat as long as the local skipper utilized the firm's motor.

When the North Sea oil fields opened up in the 1970's, a number of south Louisiana's skippers and boats went to the United Kingdom, living and working out of towns along the Scottish coast. As Dick Guidry notes, they worked themselves out of jobs rather quickly, teaching the skills of close work around the rigs to their international counterparts. The men, their families, and their boats returned to the Gulf of Mexico to prosperous times in the late 1970's. In fact, too many

boats were operating in the Gulf during this period, and when prices plummeted and activity slowed about 1984, boat companies went under. Some of the experienced and reputable companies survived. Many who sought quick riches – the proverbial doctors, lawyers, and school teachers – lost their investments.

### **5.1. Weber Callais (June 4, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*Mr. Web Callais was 88 years old in 2002. He spends many mornings at Chene's Netshop near his home in Golden Meadow, helping to make nets for the exercise and to play *bouré*. He owned a netshop for decades, but his primary business was boats, first tugboats after the war, then crew boats, then offshore boats. He serviced Humble Oil out of Grand Isle for 22 years. With only a second grade education, he is proud of a career running boats, serving on bank boards of directors, making nets, and running a 100-acre crawfish farm up in Larose.*

I wouldn't know where to start. The only thing I know what my daddy told me about where my family came from. From France. We're only four families down here. The Callais came in from France, him and his brother, and they jumped ship in New Orleans. And one came down here and one went west. So that's why they have some Callais around Lafayette and Breaux Bridge and all those places. And he came down here and he got married. Married a girl from down here and they had four boys. And those are the four families we are. My daddy used to be farming down here. Farming and trapping. Muskrat. And then from there, well, we started when we were big enough -- trawling, shrimp. And then from there, well, I went into a netshop business, making nets for those big boats, Florida-type boats. And then from there I went into the tug business. And then from there I went into offshore boat business, crew boat business. And then from there I went to regular workboats, offshore. I worked for 22 years with Humble. I'm the first guy that start down here that got a 100 footer, in 1963. And then from there all my family followed me.

About 13 years ago I retired from the boat business. I had 11 of 'em. And I find out that I had enough and then I start selling out to my grandson, to my brother, and I sold some of 'em offshore, overseas. So I got out of boat business about 13 years ago. And since then I never done nothing. The only thing I have is the crawfish farm at Larose. I had bought a plantation there in 1970. And then I went and I bought the crawfish farm. And so I been doing that since. But all my life I worked for the oil company. After the war, that's when I went into the netshop, Golden Meadow Netshop. And I stayed in there from '48 to, '48 to '69, '70, '86. '86.

*What got you all started in the boat business? You were fishing and trapping and...*

We was fishing and trapping and then we had a trawl boat. We were trawling, you see. And then in 1935, my daddy had a boat and I went to work for Gulf Oil Company, seismograph. And from there, I got my... my daddy bought me a boat. 'Cause we always did work for my daddy. We was five brothers. And then when we got old enough, well, he helped us get into business. So, from there I stayed with Gulf about six years. I had my own boat and I was getting 200 dollars a month for me and my boat. And I was working 11 and 3 off. 27 and 3 off. I always did work by myself. I sunk five times. Five time I sunk my boat. The last time that I sunk my boat there I stayed two days on the back, on top of the cabin. Nobody didn't know where I was.

‘Bout that much of the back of the boat was sticking out. And then from there, well, right after the war, we went working in the shipyard. ‘Cause we knew about boats. I knew ‘bout boats. I’m the one that was taking care of all them tankluggers, Higgins, when Higgins was building. Those boats with the ramps, you know, that they drop, them landing boats. I used to take care of all of that, after they were complete, you know, a new boat business. After they were complete there. When I used to come there and take them and go on a trial run. And then come back, put it on the bank and cutted them in 11 pieces, load it on a box car and then ship it out to California. Japan. Japan. And then when I came back from there, I went back trawling, fishing. And then we decided, me and a friend of mine... we used to go get our nets in Morgan City. They had nobody down here that was making nets for them big boats. So we went in that business there and we stayed until... when we got about nine years together, we split. He took the Cut Off Netshop. He took up that and I kept this. And then from there, in ’51, yeah, ’51, that’s when I started in the tug business. I had the netshop and I had the tug business. And then from there I went to offshore crew boats. I had one, then from one, two, three, four, you know. As I was going I was building. So, there, I worked for Humble 22 years. And then from there I went into 65 foot boats. And then from there in ’63 I built the first 100 footer that came out in the Gulf. A 100 footer by 24.

*Where did you build it?*

Halter Marine. When Halter Marine had built a little tug and a crew boat, a 40 foot crew boat, aluminum. And, ‘cause you see, all at that time we couldn’t get a boat bigger. Now, don’t get me wrong. We couldn’t get a boat bigger to work offshore with the oil company than 65 footer. ‘Cause the Coast Guard didn’t want to give us no license to work offshore. So in ’63 I went to the company and I could see that we needed a bigger boat out there. And then from there I went to the Coast Guard and start working with them. And I finally find a man that made a print, blueprint, a 100 footer and the Coast Guard approved it.

They had never fooled with offshore boats, you know. Coast Guard was new. For us. So I went to Halter Marine and he built that boat. Harold Halter. I went there with the Coast Guard and with the print and I took a chance on it. He built that boat for me, just a hull, for 97,000 dollars. And I put in the engine and all. We were using GM, 12, V12 GM, those were 500 horsepower. And I got a certificate. And then from there that’s when the big boats started offshore. He built that boat there about three months after the company asked. I was the only one, the only one with a big boat. They ask me if I wanna build another one. Said, “I don’t know.” So I build another one. Halter said, “I can’t build it for that price.” He say, “I got to get 105,000.” I say, “Okay.” ‘Bout three or four months after, the company wants another one. So I went to Halter. Well, he said, “Look, I can’t build it. I got to have 126,000.” He didn’t make money at first, you know. He didn’t know what he was going on. Just like me. And the bank, it was lending me the money. And I was young in those days, you know. That’s when we continue building. I start selling the little ones, and I was building the big ones. So, it was about 13 years ago, I had 11 of ‘em. And I start selling. Sold some to my son-in-law, some to my brother and all of that. And then that’s when I quit. I retired from that. You know, in those days, huh! A hundred thousand dollars for me that was some money. How I got it, I don’t know. Well, I had a few boats, you see. I had a few small boats that was paid for. So I was borrowing on that. And when they saw what I was doing, the bank came over there.

The last boat I built, I built it in Houma. I built, altogether I would say I built 30 boats. But I was building and I was selling. The price was there. I was selling and I was building again. The last one I built cost me 850,000. It was a 110 footer by 26. I had it built over in Bayou la Batre, Alabama. I had three of 'em built there. I had two of 'em built in Mobile. Mobile Ship and Repair. Then I had five of 'em built here in Houma, Universal. And then I had another one built by another guy in Houma. And then I had another big one built right there across the bayou. And I bought three of 'em that was already built. When things got bad in 19, what it was, 1984? Things really got bad. People was building, just like they're doing right now. Just like what happen right now. Watch what's gonna happen in about two or three years. People go, they say, "Well, I build a boat. I got a year contract." But it take eight, nine years to pay the boat. That, you know, they don't think about. I went through that already. I know what's going on. And people gonna get lost. You can't imagine how many people lost their homes down here in 1984 and '85. They built boats and then get a mortgage on the house, for the boat. And then when they shown that like GMAC (General Motors Acceptance Corporation), when they came there, they want the money. And the bank, they want all their money. And I was lucky enough that I always did get jobs, you know. When they would get in trouble, I was buying out and then put it on the job, 'cause, I don't want to brag, but I had a good reputation with the company to give them good service. I don't have no education at all. I went to the second grade. A little bit of education there, I picked it up myself, the little bit I know. I said, today, when you got three boats, they got a big oil field, they got two or three station wagons, they got a boat captain. In 1957, I had nine boats. And I had my net shop. I had a big, big building, I was making nets there. I had 11, 12 men working there. I didn't have no office. I didn't have no bookkeepers. And I was doing all my bookkeeping myself. And I had one truck and one car. That's right, and no boat captain. All day I was making that, all night I was running my 100 foot boat, which used to come in at Grand Isle. All my boats was at Grand Isle all the time, you see. In 35 minutes, 40 minutes I was there.

I was working for Humble, you see. I say that's what I did. The only advantage that I had for my bookkeeping was Otto Candies. All of my boats was hired through Otto Candies. And he was doing my payroll. And today those boat people that worked for an oil company, they gotta wait 60 days, 90 days for their money, right now. That's why it's making it so hard on 'em. But us, no. Every 15 days I was sending my invoice in. And in three days, four days at the longest, everybody had their check. You heard about it, Otto Candies, in Des Allemands? It's a big, big, big company. And it was set up. And all the rest of my bookkeeping, I was doing myself. You know how I was doing that? I had my bookkeeping, my checkbook made. And when I was collecting 50 dollars there and my credit was good. With Standard Supply, Edgar Murry, all them big companies. "I need an engine." "Yeah, just call." "I need an engine." It was down here in no time.

*Were the banks local or were they banks out of New Orleans?*

No, no, no. All local banks. Citizen Bank. Always used to be with Citizen Bank. And then, from there, I had to leave... better offer with Raceland Bank. So I left Citizen. I went to Raceland. And then, it's 32 years ago, Citizen Bank one day called me. They wanna talk to me. So I went over. And they said, "Look, we've got to have somebody from down there on the

Board." I said, "Wait, I don't have no education." "We need somebody from down the bayou on the Board of Directors." I said, "Okay." So that was, that was 20, 29 years ago. And then from there Citizen sold. Since then we went to First Interstate. First Interstate, we went to Argent Bank. Then from Argent Bank, we went to Hibernia Bank. I'm still on the Board of Directors of Hibernia Bank.

In those days, when we had the bank and all, anybody that wanted to borrow 100,000 dollars or 150,000, they used to call me. You know, I always use my judgment. We were 19 on the board. At the end, well, I used to say, "Well, what the people, what they said?" "Well, okay, well, this is my idea." I would give them what I thought. I knew everybody. I knew somebody wanted to borrow a thousand dollars and I knew he couldn't pay for it. I would tell 'em then, "I don't know. I don't think it's a good deal. 'Cause this, this, this, you know." And if it was somebody that was good, "Oh yeah, well, he's a good fellow. I think we oughta lend to him." Now since Hibernia took over, it's not like that. The only thing we do to, we don't know what's going on in the bank. We're only on the Board of Directors. Every month we go down, like last month, we had crawfish boil in Lockport. So next month it might be here in Golden Meadow or it might be in... That's all we have. We don't care. We don't know nothing 'bout what's going through the bank there. But before, sometimes two or three times a month I had to go to Thibodaux. You know, when it was a big, big, big loan, they would call a special meeting. And we would decide. But now it's not done, it's not us. We don't decide now. Hibernia Bank, they got 300 and some odd bankers.

*You mentioned Otto Candies a little bit earlier. What was that company's role in all...?*

Otto Candies. You see, in the old days all the oil company had a certain company that would furnish them the boat. You know, anytime the company needed a boat, they were calling Otto. I was working with Otto. And the company was paying him so much a month or so much a day to take care of all their boats. In other words, when they need a boat they didn't have to holler here, holler over there. He was the one that was taking care of all the boats for Humble Oil Company. And then he was getting a payroll, he was getting a percentage on the boat and that's why he was doing our payroll. You follow me what I mean? Humble was paying him and he was paying us. But us, what we was doing, every 15 days we would usually send him our log. You know, when the boat go to work they usually keep a log. They went to this rig, to this rig, to this rig, today, you know. So at the end of the 15 days we used to send him that log. And let's say, with *Calin Mary* we worked seven days or 15 days, from Grand Isle at so much a day. So then, I was sending the names of the people that was working on the boat. So, he was paying those people, and what was left, I was getting my check. So, that's why we were getting paid, too. Otto was billing Humble for that. In other words, he was like a broker.

*But he had his own boats, too, didn't he?*

Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah. He had some of his own boats. Not too many. He had two or three of 'em, that's all. But we were about 15 boats, 20 boats working out of Grand Isle. Mouth of the river. But everything was through right there, like Fourchon is right now. Well, Grand Isle is for Humble right there. Everything had to come right there at Grand Isle. They still got that big heliport there and everything.

You see, when we were doing it inside, well, for a long time, I had my little boat, was working for 'em. We used to have a boiler, steam boiler, on the rig. And then we used to haul water. We used to, what they called it, the lake up the bayou there, that big lake that was closed. Well, we used to come down and get the fresh water. And go south. I worked for Gulf six years. I went to...I used to leave Bird Island when we first started, Bird Island. The Intracoastal was not at Larose, it was at Cut Off, uh, Lockport. I used to get my boat down there, I had some tanks in it. I had told you I sank five times. And I used to leave there at three o'clock in the morning, go to Houma, to go to Houma. I didn't have enough brain that they had some water in Lockport. Why? I don't know. But they had a water plant in Lockport. Why I had to go to Houma? But I was going to Houma. By myself, and then I used to get back here 'round eight, nine o'clock at night. And I would sleep there, and then next morning, at three o'clock, gone. And then that was six years, from here. And then we went down the river, Mississippi, at Venice. We stayed three years there. I used to live there, and go to, come to New Orleans, at Bayou St. John in New Orleans there, and get my water there. Supply boat. And I always did work by myself. That's what I was telling to them the other day, I said, "When I see a can of potted meat or a can of Vienna sausage, I'll turn around and drop dead." I said, "I ate so much of that." Well, you see, I couldn't cook. I was on the boat all day. But I used to have a meal when I was at the house boat, or the quarter boat. Well, I need to eat there. But every time I was going on a trip, I had to have that. And I said, "I ate so much of that..."

*You never want to see it again. When you were working over out of Venice, did you have, were you living over there, did you have a family over there with you?*

Oh, no. No, no. We was working 11 on and 3 off. I was living right here. You see, when we were going down at Buras there, at Fort Jackson, we used to get on the levee there, the road was on the levee. And at Venice they had a little grocery store and a little hamburger place. And Texas Company had a barge in the river and they had about eight or nine wells, at Quarantine, at Garden Island. And that was the end of the world back then. Johnny Fremin. That was the name of the little store. And then, you know what we used to do, we used to leave over there in the truck, the company's truck used to take us to Gretna, Harvey. And then when we was lucky enough, they'd have one that was going in to Houma. And then we're getting off at Raceland, flag a ride to come down. And then when you was ready to go back to work, we used to get on the road and flag a ride and go to Venice. But most of the time, the company had cars or trucks that used to pass in Houma, I mean, in Raceland. And that's the way we used to go. And then, when they change, we change from 11 to 27 days on. That's three days off. But I had my own boat, you see. I built my home and everything on that. A lot of work. I mean, we weren't making too much money, but everything was cheap, you know. Everything was so cheap. But at Venice, that they didn't have nothing. When they left from over there, that's when they had start building that back road. They had started the back road from Port Sulphur. I went there two years ago, to Venice. I was lost.

On the river side, there they had a barge. Like I said, Texas Company had a little barge. And they had about five or six house. That's all they had. Now, they had houses above Venice along the river, on the levee. At Fort Jackson. But in Venice, you see Venice today, and see Venice like I saw it in 1937, '36. You can't tell it's the same place. Gulf had a marsh buggy. First

marsh buggy that was built. It had big rubber tires on it. And then that [was] what we was using in Venice. They didn't have no rig, no nothing, in Venice. Cross the river and all, they didn't have no rig. They was shooting dynamite, you know. Any time we was chasing the deer. Deer, they had deer out of this world. Rabbit, snakes, oh, a big moccasin there. I mean to tell you, you know that fresh water. And it was all grass. But now, I went through there, 'bout three years ago I went through there, across the river they don't have nothing left. No more land. No more ridge, you know, those cane ridge and all. They don't have that over there no more. It was there when we was there at Pilot Town. But now they don't have nothing left. Just the levee and water. Just like when you get off of the bridge, there at Leeville. You see, we own that property from the canal, where the bridge goes down, up to the old gray house, my family does. Well, all of that, that was all marsh and that was muskrat. We used to trap muskrat. All of that was muskrat. Trappers all over it. And then you don't even see one muskrat here. Never. You don't see that. There's no more left.

*You see a lot of discussion about the day rates on boats nowadays, you know. Two thousand dollars a day, or whatever, but it kind of fluctuates fairly quickly.*

For us, it was a hundred dollars a day.

*And that was pretty stable?*

Oh yeah. Yeah, but they would furnish everything. Oil, rope, and you didn't lose no time. The boat would break down there for two or three days, they would pay it, right, right through. And then we have only two men on the boat. And most of time they were feeding our men out there. That's why we could work for the kind of price. But when I got into the 100 footer, well, then it was 250 dollars a day. But just two men on and like I said, my rope, oil, lube, everything was paid by the company, you see. And you weren't losing time. Sometime they would come and put a boat on dry dock for Coast Guard approval, you know. And Coast Guard used to come in the morning and we was there, we had everything. In the evening, they were gone, we had our certificate. Today, you can't go through Coast Guard 'less you lose 15, 20 days. Him that was here, he just finished with one of his boats with Coast Guard. I bet you anything it didn't cost him less than, I would say, 50,000 dollars. You come down, you got a little kink on your boat there and they take a cut, it's got to be 18 foot square. If it's a little bump like that and sometime it's fuel tank, and when it get into fuel you got a little bump like that, then you gotta get a truck. You got to cover a man to get a truck, pump that fuel out, de-fume it, get the fume outta the tank and afterwards you can cut and weld. And if you got a little piece, let's say that long, they can come down and make you change 10 or 12 feet. And when you got the boat on dry dock, man, you got four, five, six men working on there. The men get 10, 12, 15 dollars a day. The welder is 30 dollars a day, you know what I'm saying? You can't go and dry dock a new boat, two years old, three years old, you can't go and dry dock right now with the time you lose, less than 25,000 dollars. And they're hard on you. And first thing you gotta do, you gotta send eleven hundred dollars to the Coast Guard. You gotta pay the Coast Guard to come and...

*So you pay the Coast Guard to lose money?*

You pay the Coast Guard, yes, sir. The Coast Guard is paid by us, our tax and all. And you can't do nothing on the boat before they come. Sometime we used to put it on dry dock, clean it up and paint it. Uh-uh. You can't do nothing. When they come, they'll tell 'em, "Well, we'll be there." Let's say you call Monday. "We'll be there Friday." Now you come there, now you losing two or three thousand a day, you understand. And then, 'specially when you go, just like when you go in dry dock, we get five-inch shafts, you see. Every three years you gotta take that boat, put it up, fold them shafts out. And put it on the side there. Then they come and they look at it. "Okay, put it back in." It's twin screw. If you break a shaft, you still got your engine to get in. But they don't go like that. Pull that power shaft out of there you can save 6,000 dollars. Like I said, the people on there, 15, 20 dollars a day. And you know how it is at a shipyard, they could start at seven o'clock, at nine o'clock you gotta have a break, at 12 o'clock, at three o'clock, you know. I was talking to Mr. Edison Chouest. I'm the one that started him in business. Edison Chouest. First boat he got, I got him to go to Humble and got him to buy... I bought that boat. I got it from Bayou la Batre, Alabama. We were talking about it, me and him the other day, they got about 400 men working there. They got 15 minutes in the morning, 15 minutes in the evening. That's a half hour. You've got 400 men, that's 200 hours. They take off maybe three, four, five minutes before they go for a little snack, you know. They come back. You can say half hour, on the 15 minute break that they got, you can say a half hour. That's 200 hours. Now they pay those guys at least from 10 to 25 dollars an hour. You put an average of 15 dollars an hour, for those men. Know how much it cost those people to get those men them 15 minutes? Like I said, it's not 15 minutes. You can say an hour, you know. You can say an hour. Two, three minutes before they go, two, three minutes before they stop, 15 minutes on the payroll. You come there, you take everything down, and you take it with you over there. And you come, most of the time he's never coming, putting in, start working right now. Either he got to get rod, or two or three of them talk a few word together. You can say an hour. Or more. So an hour, that's 400 dollars. And you can say, 15 dollars an hour, you know. There's some of them that pays less, but some of 'em more. It's what we were talking about. How much it cost for that little break. They say a man can't work four hours or five hours without stopping. We used to work. We used to do it. Yep.

*So you got Mr. Chouest started in the boat business?*

Yeah, uh-huh, yeah. He was a trawler. They were down in here and they had moved to Mississippi. His daddy went into the wood business, you know, paperwood. Pulp. And then from there, his brother-in-law was down here trawling and then he came with brother-in-law and start trawling. And he was a hard, hard, hard working man. And we always been the best of friends. They asked me, Humble asked me to build a crew boat. So I told 'em, "Yeah, I'll have that built in Raceland." And I went to him and I said, "Chouest," I said, "I got a job for a crew boat." And I said, "If you want, we're gonna go half and half." He said, "I'm making good with my boat." They was doing good. He had two shrimp boats. Like I said, he was a hard, hard worker. He said, "I'm gonna see ya later." So I said, "Okay." So about 15 days after, he called me. Said, "Look," he said, "I decided I'm gonna go." "No," I said, "I'm sorry, but I got my

money." Went to the bank and I borrowed a loan. So 'bout a month later I get a call from a guy from Bayou la Batre, had a little boat that was working there. And he said, "Mr. Weber," he said, "I'm gonna sell my boat." I said, "How much you want?" He said, "I want 35,000 dollars." I said, "I'm gonna see." So I told Chouest. He said, "Can I get a job?" I said, "Wait. Let's go talk to the man over there. We went to talk. He said, "Mr. Chouest, who's gonna run that boat?" He says, "I'm gonna run the boat myself." And I had told him what kind of man he was, you know, a hard working man. He said, "Mr. Chouest, I can't promise you more than six months of work." 'Cause see the job the boat is on, he figured about six month it was gonna take. It was surveying all the rigs, you know. "Well," he said, "You know what I can do?" It was a shrimp boat. They had pulled the rig. He said, "I just can put the rig back on and go shrimp." I said, "That's right." With a steel hull. All the other boats we had over here was all wooden boats. And that's how he got it. He went on the boat, him and his boy, Gary, Gary Chouest. And a few months... they was making money and they find another boat to buy. So they went, they bought it.... He started [from] there, him and Gary, the one that owns everything right now. Chouest got outta the business, you know. Gary bought everything from his dad, him and his other brother. And that's the way Edison started. So that's why anything I need with those people, you know, the shipyard, anything. They didn't forget that, you know, what I done for them. I helped them get the job. I found the boat and brought him to the office and everything.

*When he got the steel hull shrimp boat from over in Bayou la Batre, was that the beginnings of steel hulled shrimp boats, too, here, 'cause most of 'em were wooden before then?*

Yeah, yeah, it came from Bayou la Batre, the steel boat. Over here it was all wood. Here and Florida was all wood. Florida, them big shipyards, they was all oak. But, uh, Bayou la Batre they had start making steel hull shrimp boats. Over here, they were smaller boats. They was all about 55, 58 foot boats. We were talking about the Coast Guard a while ago. That I was telling you that you couldn't get a license for bigger then 65. I had a friend of mine, Martin, his son got all them big boats that's doing all the trawling for the rigs and all. He's well off. He built right next to the shipyard down there, a big cabin for his boat and a dock and everything. Oh, he's well, well off. And he had a boat that was 70 foot long and the name of it was the *Captain Jimmy*. That was his son, Jim. That was the only boy he had. And he had to cut four feet off of the boat. They cut four feet off the stern. People don't believe that, but that was there, I mean, right here on the bayou. We went to him and his son, we were talking about that the other day. "Do you remember when...?" he say -- and I helped him with the Coast Guard, you know -- "... that daddy had..." "Oh yeah I remember when your daddy had to cut his boat off." Took four feet offa that. That's how tough they was on the size of the boat. Why? You had a 65 foot boat there. And then you had one of them Equitable Boats. They used to build them crew boats. A 40 footer, a 44 footer. They were given to carry 30, 35 men. We had a 65 footer, 25 feet wide, over there you had a little bitty boat was 45 feet long, maybe 15 feet wide. That could kept 40, 30 men. And that kind of boat like that we could not'a kept more than eight, 10 men. I never could understand that. And the Coast Guard been that hard on us since they came out to inspect them boats.

*So the inspections, were they regular or were they kind of surprise inspections that the Coast Guard...?*

No, no, no. It was a year, two years for the hull and one year for the top. What we call the top is your life preservers and your fuel tank and all of that. "Top inspection," we call it. It's one year, every year. And the hull is two years. And the shaft now is three years. But before it was two years. Every two years we had to put it on dry dock and pull the shaft out. It's twin screw. That's the rule. Oh, yeah, you see the first boat that came here on the bayou, the passengers were hired. I took a shrimp boat, the name of the shrimp boat was the *Liberty Bell*. I went to work with Schlumberger. Schlumberger was a foreign company. And it had to be Coast Guard approved. And we didn't know what Coast Guard approved was. We didn't know nothing that we had to have. So I start working on that. My boat, after the crew was on, Schlumberger was on, stayed three months before I could get a certificate to go to work. Every time they would come, they were coming up with stuff, what they wanted for Coast Guard approval, we couldn't buy. They didn't have it down here. Coast Guard approved boats was over in New York, you know, up north. But not down here. We didn't know but nothing. It took me three months to put that boat to work. It was a 55 footer. It was a trawl boat. But we had, you see, all of them rigs, all them units, Schlumberger had all them rigs, you know. They use it to go and take pictures down there and I know you know what else. But [they] would take pictures of gravel pack down there. Every platform had a rig on it, had a unit. And my boat had maintenance men for them, that goes around from platform to platform to keep them rig units in shape. When they need it it was there. Three months it took. That was in 19, let's see, it was about 1955.

*So you started off with tugs and then you went to crew boats. Any reason why you would...?*

Well, I had my netshop and I had my tug working for Schlumberger. Schlumberger had a barge with all the rigging on it, you know. And I was working with them, pushing them little boats from everywhere. Inland. Inland. And then the money was not the same money as when we started offshore... I was building and selling out, you know, and then I build it again. 'Cause every time we built, it would be bigger and bigger. You know, I had went to 100 footers, and then we had come back to 80 footer, 90 footer. And then we went back to 110 foot. And then the last one, him that was here, he just got a big one there, 165 footer. Brand new boat. In those days, we were talking about two, three hundred thousand. Now you don't talk about that. You talk millions.

*And it was the companies like yourselves that had the finance, then? The major oil companies didn't give you any financing, did they?*

No, no.

*But some of them already had contracts with you on...*

You see, you see, a contract with an oil company is no good. People tell me, "Man, I got a contract for... a year contract." "What this good for? It don't pay for your drinking water." "How come?" I tell 'em, "I give you a little on that. Is that seller for California here?" Because

Chevron was California before Chevron. What was his name? Anyway, Chevron told him to build a 54 footer. So he built it. The *Lily in the Sea*. They had given him a year contract. And money, in 1984 when the bottom fell, everything went to... They call him in -- he had four or five months made on the contract -- that, if he wanted to take his boat off the job and then as soon as the things would change a little bit, they was gonna re-hire him. Well, "No, no," he said, "I got my contract." Well, two or three days after, they called him again. They said, "Well, what we gonna have to do is to send you to Venice." He said, "Okay." They sent him to Venice. Got into Venice. They have a little pack they take out to that rig. It was in the Gulf, you know. Three or four hours from Venice. So he took it off. He said, "Wait, wait, wait. Look, you got this you got to take outta the mouth of the Mississippi River." East, out of Mobile, there. So when he got there, he put in the box, he hadn't gotten to the box yet. You take that in. Maybe an hour after he was there, then they said, "Okay, you going back, take this to this rig." Four days and four night, he told me, "Never shut my engine down." And there were only two men on the boat at that time. He said, "I went out, told 'em I had to quit." "We couldn't lay you off, but," he said, "we tried to tell ya' that's that. We didn't need the boat anymore." Thing was, the rigs was shutting down left and right, they didn't need any boat. That's how your contract was good. They couldn't cut your contract, but they could make you quit. So, oil companies, they can do you all kinds of things, you know. When it come, come from the office. Well, send him there, send him. The men there, they hate to do it, but that's their job. You take that over there, you take over here, you take that over there. So that's why I said a contract is no good.

*How did you manage to get through the times when things went bad?*

Oh, oh. Well, when things went bad, I managed. I kept all my jobs, see. I didn't lose my jobs. I was hooked up with, I was with Humble. Matter of fact, when they needed a boat, they used to get me to buy. Humble never went down, you know. It's not all the companies that went down. But Humble followed when some went down, they didn't go over the edge, you understand me. They needed some boats. And a lot of those people had boats and they were quitting and they were trawling through all that. It was all trawl boats. I managed. I remember, I always kept all my jobs.

*So then it was fairly common for other people who were having trouble to go back into trawling?*

No, they didn't have no trouble to go back to trawling. They only put the winch back on it and the rigging and that's all they have to do. When they took it over they just clean the rig off the boat, you know. The winch, the mast, put that there. But you see, all my boats, all my boats always been steel boats. And when they let some of them boats go, they were wooden boats. Well, they would let the wooden boats go and still keep the steel boats.

*So getting back to kind of the operations now, you were talking about, you know, contracts aren't any good. But, when North American Shipyard builds a boat on speculation that Shell will have them working....*

Well, well, well, you see, that's a little different. Let's say they'll go to North American, say, "I want you to build a boat for seismograph. This is what we want, this is what we want, this what we want." So then if they get a five year contract, they got to spend for that contract, 'cause they

built that boat as the spec, you know, the way they wanted. So, that's why, if it's...and offshore boats, they're all built alike. They lay you off, you go to work for another one, they lay you off, you go to work for somebody else. Like hauling water or... But, like Chouest, some of them boats was built for oil companies, they can carry mud, drilling mud. Or cement, or something like that. When they got to have the special equipment that they gotta put on there, you see. So, when they give you a contract, well, you know that you're gonna be there with that equipment. So I doubt if they lay you off, 'cause what they gonna do with the equipment? Just start carrying that and moving it out of the boat. Well, they can't. A rig boat is the same thing. Now, he's building a boat now. Three hundred feet long. Chouest. He's building it at Larose, North American right there, that shipyard, you know. He's gonna have the biggest winch that's ever been built. They're having it built right now. They're gonna go to work and build, when they start going on eight, four, five thousand feet, you see. That winch gonna be big enough that they're gonna be able to set the casing, which a rig can't handle that, you know. Then they will be equipped to do that. That boy's got enough brain that he sees what's coming. You know what he's got right now that the people been thinking? You know them rigs that's 100 mile, 120 mile out? It's too far, a boat that, it take eight, nine hours, 10 hours to come in, you know. With the crew, and ten hours to go back. But he took some of them big boats that was working with seismograph, that finished that job, seismograph done, start slackening down. And 220 foot, 230 foot. He got that, he made a hotel out of it. He's got two of 'em right now. One of 'em that can carry about 40 or 50 rooms in it. The other one got 80 room in it. And they got their equipment in that boat that they put into there. I don't care how rough is it, how the wind, how the current, everything. He's got that, that, computer one (dynamic positioning systems). They stay right there. So when they not called, they're right at the hotel, and when they go back to work, they're right back on the rig. He's got two of 'em now. Now he's figuring on fixing some more. They gonna put them rig out there, 'cause everyone on that platform, they can hold like 40, 50, 100 men. Some might have 100 men on there, out there. Well, they gonna room and board them, as a hotel.

*Pretty clever.*

That's a good boy, that Chouest.

*I haven't been able to talk to Mr. Edison yet.*

No? He might be at his camp, then, yeah. He's fishing all the time. All the time. He just bought himself one of them, what you call them, a catamaran? I went and look at it. It's 28 feet. He paid 88,000 dollars. I said, "Chouest, what you gonna do with that?" He's got five of 'em. And then other kinda boats, you know, fishing boats. He fishes every day, every day, every day, every day. I said, "What you gonna do with that? That's what you want, you can afford it." He can afford it. That man, that man. Poor like he was raised, you know. We was all raised poor, very, very poor, all of us. And seeing the way he is right now. He just sold his half [of] the first ice breaker that they built. When they built it, it cost 48 million. And then he just sold it, his half to his son, to Gary, 20 million. So I know he's got 20 million of cash. Now he sold all his other share. He's got share in three boats left that's working with LOOP. They had bought that boat. They had paid, I believe, around three million. They sold it. We used to go to Biloxi and tie it up there at the big hotel in Biloxi, Water Front...what is it, the Waterfront Hotel? Stay a

week. But now we can't do that no more. He got his [camp] at the island, not too far from mine. We're still good friends. He don't feel too good. He can tell you how hard it was when they started.

## 5.2. Chester Cheramie (March 4, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA)

I was in South America submarine patrol and then I stayed there for about a year and we came back to the States and we started hauling the equipment preparing for the invasion of North Africa and then the invasion of England, and most of the time I didn't know that. I was young, I was just a punk, 19 years old. And after we did all this we [went] back to the States. That is when we found out what we were doing and I got transferred to the Pacific, the Philippines Islands. I stayed in the Philippine Islands from April of '45 to November of '45. Another thing I didn't know is that we were getting ready to invade Japan when we were there. All the supplies and all the ships coming in those days and the atomic bomb was dropped everything ceased and I got to come home. They offered you a business and personally I went to work as a roughneck in Golden Meadow. I never did work on boats but my daddy, after he left the fishing industry, he worked in offshore boats and captained offshore boat and did that until the day he passed away and my brother went into the boat business, which his son now has. He passed away younger than I was, passed away but my nephew runs the business now called Cheramie Boat Company. He's very prosperous in it.

When the oil field started the offshore right after the war back in 1945, or '46, I remember the gentleman that built the first supply boat to go offshore. The name of the boat was the *Grand Isle*, by Mr. Joe Leonard, Sr., that built that. He worked for Exxon or Humble or one of those companies, and after that Mr. Albert Cheramie, Sr., he had a fishing boat he converted as a lugger and from there it went...eventually people started building supply boats and tug boats and so down the line. And the Golden Meadow area was one of the prime sections of the oil field besides Morgan City. They started drilling right in Golden Meadow, then they went to Leeville and then to Bay Marchand right out of Fourchon just a little offshore. In those days they had to work crew shifts, you had from seven and four, then four to twelve. People would come in every night. Not like it is today where you stay out there seven, 14 days on the rig.

So a lot of these people down in this area, the Golden Meadow area, either started building up boats or took a shrimp boat and convert it into a lugger or some kind.... You take Mr. Nolte Theriot which at one time was one of the biggest tug boat operators in southern Louisiana. He lived right here in Golden Meadow. Him and his daddy took a lugger and converted it to a tug boat. When he passed away in 1976 he had twenty-six tug boats and that was a man who could see the future. It's like Mr. Edison Chouest today, people that could see the future. And then people after that started building like they did. I remember Minor Cheramie, he was a deckhand on a shrimp boat. Him and his brother built a little crew boat and from there they went to 50, 60 big supply boats. A lot of the stories of people and how they got started here. It's amazing to me how all your people like young generations saying "Man, look at that guy with all that money and he never worked," and you tell them the story of how they started, these people, and they don't believe you.

These guys were working in a shrimp shed or a shrimp boat or oystering. They just took a chance and they knew that in the Gulf of Mexico you didn't need no license, not like it is today. A man could be a captain of a boat 'cause all these captains was ex-fishermen and ex-trawlers and that is what they had done all their life, work in boats. They could close their eyes and take you anywhere in the Gulf of Mexico, anywhere you wanted. And today you had to have 200 ton, 300 ton license and in those days you didn't need that. If you had that, none of them could've gotten it 'cause none of us could read and write. So they only used the stars and the moon to find the location, and it was amazing how these guys knew that and how they survived.

*Did your brothers get into the boat business or the oil business?*

Yeah, my brother went into the business. Well my brother started...he went into the service, Merchant Marine. And when he come out he went to work for Halliburton. He worked for Halliburton quite a few years. Like my daddy. My daddy worked in tug boats and all that. And he got interested in boats. Me, I never could get interested in boats. So after a few years with Schlumberger he decided, him and one of his wife's brothers, decided to go into the boat business. His partner had what was called a clipper. And that's how they got started. Like everybody else, he got started back at a bad time, back in the '50's. But they survived. And then he passed away about eight, nine years ago. Since then his son took over. Still got the company. Nine or ten boats now...

*When the oil started in Golden Meadow, was it easy for local kids to get jobs in the companies or the boats?*

The oil companies started asking people... 'cause nobody had any, the only thing we had was fishing boats, trawlers and they all would convert them into what you called luggers, and then from that, that's when we started to build steel-hulled... Mr. Joe Leonard built the first one and from there is where it took off. It was at the time a big monster, about a forty-footer. So that is how the thing got going in supply boats. Then they needed tug boats. After a few years they started to going offshore and they needed a tug to pull their rig on the location. So they started building tugs, supply boats and crew boats. The crew boat was taking the crews to the platforms in those days. And they were little bitty things maybe 25, 30 foot long. And well today, they are over 100 foot long because they are going further and further out. If you go to Fourchon today you can see the structures. See how close they are from the Gulf of Mexico and the thing ate so much, the Gulf of Mexico receded so much for losing so much ground... some of these rigs were onshore at one time. They were onshore when they build those thing. You can see the structure. See just the structure and everything else. Didn't need no pilings in those days. As one of the first, in south Louisiana here, that was the first one...offshore rig. They call it offshore rig but it was right in Bay Marchand. Right off the beach. But the first big offshore rig that I remember was out of Morgan City. Out of Morgan City because, you know, that was offshore. But I don't recall how far offshore it was, but it was not that far. I mean it was offshore anyhow.

*The folks that built up the boat fleets...did they get outside financing from banks?*

I think in those days Kennedy Marine... I think it was out of Mississippi and they would build a boat... If you'd use their engine they'd finance your boat. Now that's how most of these guys

got started. If you go see those people, say that you would like to build a boat but ain't got enough money, but I'll put one of your engines in it...that's how a lot of these guys got started. With the Kennedy Marine. They were one of the biggest contributors down here as I remember.

*But how quickly would somebody like Joe Leonard be able to expand his fleet? Was he building all the time?*

I think Mr. Leonard had one or two boats. Then he got out of the business. And other people got into the business. Like the Callais, the Cheramie brothers...You know everybody started, you know, to get in. This guy, you know, built one little boat to get their feet wet. In those days they'd go to a company to get with Chevron, Exxon. And that's how they got in there. Not got in, but if they needed a boat they'd go talk to them. They said, "Well, I can't promise you nothing." "If I build a boat can I get a job with you?" "Well, if we need a boat..." That's how these guys did that. Which it is today too, you know? They don't promise you anything. You build and take a chance that, you know, you've been with the company quite a few years and they say, "Well, we'd like to have a bigger boat." So you build the bigger boat, but you might have a job today but if the job depletes, that's it...and you start over again. That's how...you can see up and down this bayou. We got quite a few boats tied up. I say six months ago you could not even find a boat.

*We've talked to a lot of people who seem to think the industry is a lot more volatile...up and down recently. Do you see that?*

Yeah, yeah. I like to remember way back when I come out of the service in the 40's and you see I got...it goes up one minute and all of a sudden it goes down. It all depends on how the oil's selling and all that stuff. I remember back in the 50's we had...it was right after the war. We did not have that many boats, didn't have that many people in the boat business I don't think. And then all of a sudden a company needed more boats. That was back in the early 50...'54, '55 boom. Oil dropped and stopped drilling. Didn't have the equipment to go further out. Not that you couldn't but you didn't have the equipment to drill that deep... I don't know too much about the leases but the federal government wouldn't lease all that land. And then it picked up again, took quite a while to pick up. And then back in the '70's...late '60's the thing took off again. There it took off in another 10 years. In the '80's down we went again. And that lasted about eight, nine years. And then the '90's, '91, '92, that thing popped up again. Now, here we are in the same cycle. It's slowing down again. So it all depends on the price of oil. How many boats that's out there and the new-builds and all that stuff. And that's what the oil companies tell you, "build, build, build." The more boats on the market, they can pick the ones that has the cheap price on it. That's what happened to some of these oil companies. They want good service but they are looking out for themselves too. If they can get the guy to charge 200,000 dollars and I charge 150,000 now they are going to go ahead and give me the job. Everybody is the same way.

Nolte Theriot was the first company that went over to the North Sea, drilling in the North Sea. They went with the boats. All the captains went over there. It is all guys, not all of them, but I would say 50 percent of the guys were born and raised on shrimp boats. Maybe a few that had little license...tug boat license. Maybe 50, 100 ton, maybe. They'd cross the Atlantic Ocean all

the way to Great Yarmouth. Went to Great Yarmouth in England. And then to the North Sea. First, to get the rigs and then everything else. I think Nick would have it, the *Cajuns of the North Sea*. And that's where the company started from. The *Cajuns of North Sea*, that's the company I worked for. All these guys would come, they are all from Golden Meadow. This fellow, at one time, had at least 20 boats working in the North Sea. And, of course... it was so rough. The oil industry, the oil companies, would find out what you were paying. Whatever you were getting there was better than what you were getting here, you know? Maybe they were getting maybe 10-15 dollars a day more than you were getting here, you know? I did not know what the price was...See they wind up there and then they send a whole crew. Then, after a while...Then they say, "Well, you've got to use one of our men... you're in my country, you got to have one of my men on your boat." "We are not going to make him a captain but maybe a mate." So he is a mate to learn the tricks, see. Then they started working in Norwegian waters. "Well, you got to put one of my men on there." So they started using Norwegian seamen and deckhands. Stuff like that. Then it got into Amsterdam. By the time they left the North Sea, the only American they had left on there was a captain, an American captain, and an American assistant captain. All the rest were Englishmen, Dutch, Norwegian, Germans, Spaniards. You see, all these countries you know ... the engineers were mostly from Germany. The Norwegians has seamens. They know the seas. The Englishman are the same way. So they made them mates. A guy from Spain, Azores, a deckhand. Spain and Portugal and the French were all cooks. Those guys were like a specialty. They knew their job, you know, like you have a Portuguese cook or a French cook or a Spanish deckhand or a Norwegian deckhand. And so down the line. But almost all of the engineers were German. That was the law or you didn't work. After a few years, England learned how to build their own boats. After the Americans showed them what is going on you push them out, you know? I brought you to this town or whatever it is, you show me how to do this job. And the first thing I say, "Well, you can do it, we don't need you no more." Understand what I am saying? Just like the oil field. When the oil field started here, no one knew nothing about the oil field. Everyone came from Texas.... it could have been from Lafayette or from Texas. No one knew anything about the oil fields. They got started and you started working as a roustabout. That's how they got started. Drillers. Drilling superintendents. Just like anything else, you learn it. So that's what happened up in the North Sea. They kicked all these companies out...I believe Candies is the only company left now I believe... And that's about it, I guess.

I decided I was 74 years old, it is time to retire. Not that I wanted to. My wife made me. I had a good job. Through the end my job with them was just like public relations work and all. And I went three days a week. And they paid me not minimum wage but not enough to mess up with my social security, you know? My wife say, "We don't need that, get away from that." For the first six months after I got out every morning I would get up and go to the office. One morning I caught myself. I said, "What in the hell am I doing here?" It finally dawned. After 26 years every morning...and I missed it at the beginning. Now, I go when I want to. It grows on you like anything else. So I enjoy what I am doing. I come over here in the morning, shoot the breeze with these guys, stay an hour or so then do what I got to do. So that's about the speed of my life. I enjoyed it. Can't expect more than that at my age. I have a lot of friends that are gone, much younger than me. I've survived so far. Like I always said He'll put my name in yet.

### 5.3. Roy Champagne (September 20, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)

*Roy Champagne drove supply boats for L & M Botruc. Two brothers, Lefty and Minor Cheramie, built up the boat rental company from modest beginnings in 1947. The botruc design was patterned after an automobile ferry working in Rhode Island, which a Chevron transportation supervisor had seen while on vacation. The ferry, with a deckhouse forward and a spacious afterdeck, proved to be ideal for carrying oil field supplies, so Lefty and Minor built and built. Minor, Jr., "MJ," now runs the company out of the Golden Meadow base, with the help of his son, Minor "Tony" Cheramie, III. Roy lives across the fence from the L & M office, and comes in most days for coffee. He brought his good friend Elvis "Al" Chabert along for the interview. Al worked 33 years for Texaco, mostly as a toolpusher, retiring in 1984. Roy himself started in the oil field in 1954.*

I was shrimping before that. No, in '57 was when I started. I was shrimping in Texas. I got chased by the Mexican gunboats, and that's when I came back over here and started on a crewboat for MJ's uncle. MJ's uncle, Lefty, was the original Cheramie Brothers. Hired me for two days. Somebody had a toothache on the boat. Thirty-seven years and 14 days later... No, I take it back. Three days. I'd kid him when I see him. "My three days up yet?" I guess not, I'm still around. When I started, they had three wooden tugs. I started on the tugs for Humble in Paradis, the district office. That's what we run out of, take pipe, mud, all kinds of stuff to the rigs in different locations in the district. Now you got bulk mud. In those days it was sacks, and handled by hand, not by a forklift. You'd go to the rigs, tie the barge off, and go back to Paradis. Then go somewhere else. We'd cover from the Houma area, East Lake Verret on the other side, back of Napoleonville, but you got to go through Bayou Boeuf to get there. Lake Ponchartrain, Little Lake, and down the river, Southeast Pass. Cross the Ostrica Locks, and get on the other side, Redfish Bay. On the backside of Lake Borgne, they had a rig there too. We'd pick up a barge in Paradis and bring it to Harvey and load it in Harvey. Once it's loaded, we'd bring it to the rig, tie it up, leave the paperwork with the toolpusher. If you had an empty barge, you'd bring it back to the dock in Paradis. The Mississippi district was operated out of Port Sulphur. The same thing, water, pick up a water barge and bring them water, mud, drill pipe, casing. Then we started building tank batteries. Two guys on the boat.

Fifty-seven, that's when they come out with the botrucs. I worked with them even before they had the botrucs. The first one, we went to pick it up in Harvey. We were supposed to go to Rhode Island, but they brought it. We picked it up at George Engine in New Orleans. That was a big one in those days, 65 feet.

*What's so special about the botrucs, as a captain...?*

The big ones, I can't tell you. The only boats I worked on was the botrucs. To me, I can run circles around them. I used to pull into the slip in Leeville, and some guys -- this is the truth I'm telling you -- had bow thrusters, couldn't get in the slip if there was a boat tied up at the fuel dock. I used to get in there, no bow thrusters. After I got a boat with bow thrusters, I was spoiled. Before I got on the bigger ones, they come out with 9, which was an 80 footer, working for Gulf for three and a half years. Then I got pissed off one day at the dispatcher 'cause I had just come in and he wanted me to go back out to get some stuff. They would have had to send

two small boats out, same size but not as wide as the *Botruc 9* was. You could fit it all on one, no problem. Came to the phone and called Woody, told him, put me somewhere else. I made my trip. I never refused the trip. And then I started on *11*. That was a big one. The only thing is, you had to operate it from in the wheelhouse. No problem, they handle. Lot of 'em had to slow down in bad weather, when you were pounded. All we do is add some salt water in the tanks we had drill mud in...never slowed down....

Backin' up to a rig, this is where you have to have a little bit of experience and knowhow, 'cause you're backing in between those rigs, them legs, you catch your rope on this side. Them jackups, they'll rip you apart, going up and down... [looking at photos of jackup rigs] You can see that the current's running this way. You have to catch this line first. You got to slide on this side and back up to catch this line. After these two lines are tied up, you got to come ahead to keep a strain on the line. Then you keep that line tight to make sure you don't drift into the other legs. You got to keep your engine in gear and keep a steady pull on it to hold your boat straight. Then you use your bow thrusters. If your bow goes this way, you got to turn it back this way with the bow thruster. You got to steady it until you're finished. Fuel, water, liquid mud, bulk cement, anything that the rig needs, we used to haul it. Groceries.

*Whose job was it to unload?*

The guys on the rig would send you a crew. A lot of times you got sent to different rigs. You'd got to get with them, tell 'em this, this, this and this is yours, and you'd watch them, make sure they didn't pick up something that wasn't theirs.... Every tank had a tag with the name of the rig on it. You'd put it on deck, move to the next one.

*Who's responsible out there, say it's rough conditions, you got to get out of there quick...?*

I do. The people I worked for here, whatever the decision I would make, that's one thing I can say about it, MJ's not here, his late daddy would do it, they always took my word for what I said. And we had a toolpusher from Gulf, a transportation supervisor for Gulf. If I told him they had 10 foot seas out there...you know whose word he's gonna take? My word. Old man Tony Price. The best transportation supervisor I ever worked for. I'll tell you one instance. We was working out of Leeville. I was working on *Botruc 9*. We had two at Leeville at the same time. Leave at 10 o'clock at night, the other at 10 o'clock in the morning. One would go to what we called the east side, and the west side. And there was one from Morgan City. The toolpusher out at the rig, he told the captain, he said, "Roy, what you doing now?" "I'm just about through pumping water." There's two Zapata rigs. All they had in between them was a catwalk. He had a string of drill pipe. This is the honest to God truth. That's how he was, old man Price. The other rig, the toolpusher, calls him. "Well, when you're finished with that...come along side. I've got a string of drill pipe I want sent in." "Hold up," he says. "Let me look at my yellow sheet. I don't see anything coming from the Morgan City office. You have to verify that with Tony Price." He says, "I'll call him on the phone." He called him on the phone. "Mac, what you got on your yellow sheet?" Mr. Price, everybody called him Mr. Price, not Tony. "I'm going from Morgan City." He says, "Mac, need I say more?" Okay. That toolpusher never called him back. Everywhere you'd go, you had a yellow sheet. You go to this rig here, this rig here, and this rig here. Now you could be out of water at one rig. Your name is not on here, I don't have to go to

you. Good-hearted. You're out of water, I'll go to you, but I don't have to. One of them wanted me to run an hour and a half, go pick up some mail. I said I ain't going to pick up no mail because I don't have to go to you...

I came here one day, and I'd completed my seventeenth year. Minor was in his office, I was joking with him. I said, "Hey, 17 years today. Don't get nothing special?" And I left, jokingly. That afternoon he called me, come to the office. He gave me a Bulova Acutron, and I still have it, and I can't wear it. To the gold, I'm allergic. I put it on once in a while when I go to mass, for an hour. And on 20 years he gave me a thousand dollar bonus, and then I told MJ, "MJ, this is my last trip, 14 days." And he thought I was joking. I told him, "The day I make 62, I'm gone." My first license I got was in 1957. I had to have a 100 ton license when I went on *Botruc* 9. I need a 100 ton operator's license for it. And when I got on the big boats, I needed a 300 ton license. I got that one, too. And the last one was 1600 tons, with unlimited radar, and you're talking to a guy that's got a seventh grade education. In fact I didn't complete the seventh grade, I quit. When I retired I still got my license. I could have renewed last year because they give you a year's grace. I renewed it just for six months.

*What kind of exams were there for these licenses?*

Written. When they give you the test, you had to answer, like, in the book. Then they come with that grandfather clause. You had multiple choice, and if the answer was close, the guy that was checking your papers would ask you what you meant by what you wrote. And if you'd tell him to where he could understand what you wrote, he'd give you credit for it. The first one they come out with was for the mate. I passed that one with flying colors, right there at the Golden Meadow fire station. He said, you can go to New Orleans to get your mate's license. Plus I have AB. "I don't want my mate's license. That don't do me no good." Then when that master part was approved, I went to New Orleans. Taking the test, they had one yoyo in there. I hope that one day I meet him on the road and he's got a breakdown. And if he'd been in here, I could tell it to his face, too. They checked my papers. The guy says, "It's getting late, four o'clock." And that was it. The guy says, "Where's your plotting?" You got to plot, to know where you're going. They give you a course, to leave from here to here, and they're never going to give you a straight line. You got to pass over something. After you know the map, you could see if it was a boat sunk all the way, partly, if it's a rock, or sand, or what it is. He asked me, "Where's the answers?" "Right here, I gave them to you." They couldn't find them nowhere. The yoyo had thrown them, had tore them. He didn't say nothing. So the guy says, "Well, you're gonna have to come back tomorrow." No problem, and within half an hour... all I had to do was show them the plots that I took, and it just so happens that the one that I had was the easiest one. In those days we didn't have no Loran. With Loran you don't need nothing. You just put your course in and that's it. If you're too far to the right it will blink to go to the left. If you're too far left, it will blink to go to the right. When you get to all zeros, where you're at is right there. That's where you're going.

*When did that technology come on?*

As I remember, I was on dry dock for a Coast Guard inspection...I'd say the last 10 years. We didn't have it. The guy said, "I'll show you the basic steps." The book that he gave me for that

particular type of Loran, it was like putting milk and sugar in your coffee. That's how simple it was, after you get the hang of it. And when you leave the rigs, your last stop, if it's a straight course, you just push "return" and it gives you a reverse course to go back. I've worked in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas. Texas, we leave Freeport, Texas, and come to a rig south of Vermillion Bay, a hundred and some miles offshore. Unocal, they had an office in Intracoastal City and we was running out of Freeport, Texas. Fuel, water, mud, and a lot of times you'd have two rigs and you'd have to split your load of water, especially drinking water, because a lot of those big rigs, you'd never pump drinking water to them. They got them units on it that picks up saltwater and makes fresh water. Lot of them big rigs got two of them. You keep them running 24 hours a day and whenever they have enough water to drink themselves, they'd just run it through the drillwater tanks. ...We used to carry almost four thousand sacks of bulk mud, cement. It's less, but if it was too rough to unload you'd grab a buoy or they'd tell you to run back in and wait. If the seas were heading in the right direction you'd run back out and pick up what you need....I was telling MJ, I got two more hitches to pull. I promised I'd pull a couple of hitches for him so he could go shrimping. In the summertime I'd do that for him. We had a five-man crew. At one time we were six.

We got living quarters on those boats. In my room I had two bunk beds, single bunks, and my bed was a big double bed. Your cook had his quarters, engineer had two bunks in his room, mate had his room and the deckhand had his room, and when we doubled up to six men I'd let the mate sleep in my room. We had watches, every two hours. If you're on anchor, you keep the radio on, standing by for the weather or waiting for something... If you're at the rig, you go to the backdown buoy, you'd grab it with a rope, and you'd back up to the rig. You'd have your bow at the buoy. After you're tied up, you'd put your winch on and suck up some of that slack on the rope to pull it tight. If the current changes... I was in the wheelhouse 'case you needed to call me real quick.

*With dynamic positioning...*

Oh, they still use those buoys to tie up. But if you got a boat with a dynamic positioning system, you don't need that buoy anymore. After he's set it, that's it. Comes hell or high water, you can't move him from there. But they put that for the boats that would be there for a long time. If we were just dropping off a few things, we wouldn't catch that buoy, we'd just hold it in place. But if we were there pumping water, fuel, mud and stuff like that, or unloading drillpipe, casing – you couldn't put it all in one tier, you'd have to make two tiers, and it would be too high. That way you knew you'd be there awhile, take a long time to unload. They wouldn't mess with you at night, tell you to be there early in the morning. I've pumped many a gallon of fuel and many a gallon of water. Never a spill, neither on the boat or on the water while I was on it. I checked them connections myself. Now one time I'll tell you I shut down a rig. *Diamond M 92*. I told the guy, "I'm going to send you the hoses." "Na, na. You hook up the hoses downstairs." "Uh, uh. I want your motorman down here." "What for?" "I want your motorman," and when I tell him this is the water, this is fuel. And he come down, that's just what he did. He put the water in the fuel and the fuel in the water. I told him, "You see that hose? It's a fire hose. This is water." And I had my crew with me, we tied up on the side. They had big bumpers on the side. It was like in here, like glass. All of a sudden, old Luke, he's still alive today, he was on the other rig. He'd got that guy on the next boat going in. The pusher on the other rig, he was first

cousin with my wife. "The first boat that moves, you're going on it." Had to wait till they cleaned everything, pump in some fuel... Like I said, the motorman come down, he didn't know what was what.

Whatever came through my meter, that's what I put on the ticket. And the guy that came down, I'd make him read my meter. And when I closed the valve, I'd make him take the readings on the bottom, subtract it, and come out with what I have. One time he told me, "What happened to the cement? We're five hundred sacks of cement short." "Well, you want to come down and check the tanks?"

It's going to be six years in April that I retired. I told MJ, I'm going off Monday the twenty-third, it's going to be 14 days. He thought I was joking. When I came back, I told him. I'm through. And I'll tell you why. Right now I do more than when I was on the boats. I'm involved in lots of stuff, church, all kinds of stuff.

*You ever go back to shrimping?*

I got a boat at the house, outboard, that hasn't seen the water in seven years. I used to shrimp with it myself. Got a kangaroo tail on it and all. I got a brand new trailer that's seen the water twice. I got tired of the water. And my wife, she used to come with me, but she don't like the water.

#### **5.4. Dick Guidry (October 4, 2001; Galliano, LA)**

*In the 1960's Dick Guidry ventured north to drill for oil in Michigan and Kentucky. He lost his money drilling dry holes. He returned to Louisiana and expanded the drilling operations, and in the early 1970's started building tugboats. He built a fleet of about nine tugboats and two barges, and then bought the Dilsaver Company out of Morgan City, which had about 18 or 20 tugboats.*

In the early '70's I started building ocean-going tugs. From 5,000 to 12,000 horsepower. And I brought those to Europe. I worked in the Bahamas docking ships. I worked hauling steel to Colombia and Venezuela, and I docked supertankers in the Bahamas and we buried pipelines in the North Sea for 18 years. We had better than 300 Cajuns between Nolte Theriot, Inc. and myself. We had about 37 tugs working there, and we had about 300 Cajuns we brought to the North Sea. It was quite a cultural shock for both the British and the Cajuns. But we got along great, famously, and did a good job over there.

We've been active in the oil and gas business until 1985, and then I was building, I had contracted for two boats, in Santander, Spain. Two boats. It was costing six million apiece, but when the first one came out, oil dropped to nine dollars a barrel. Oil contracts were cancelled and I was stuck with a tremendous debt, and I went under, like most people did in those days, and that's pretty much how the oil field...I think we went broke five times. It's all peaks and valleys. Things get good and you cannot follow the predictions from anybody. The Carter Administration were blatant liars about the potential oil and gas futures. They predicted 80

dollar oil, per barrel, they predicted a shortage, that we'd run out in 40 years, and they knew nothing about what they were talking about. Absolutely nothing.

*What made you go look at Kentucky when you had all this oil right here?*

Because it's cheaper to drill 600 feet than it is to drill 10,000 feet. In Kentucky I could drill an oil well and put oil in the tanks for 5,000 dollars. And for us, say 600 to 800 barrels a day, there was 1200 to 1600 dollars a day. I mean, you get a payout in four or five days. I couldn't do that in Louisiana, because I didn't have the 150-250,000 per well. But then I did have it after a few years, and I went and blew it in Michigan. Between Battle Creek and Jackson in a little town near Albion called Concord. That's where I drilled. I was looking for the Detroit Black River [formation]. And if you hit it there, every well was worth 10 million dollars. You could sell it to Detroit investors, I mean, they were getting eight and nine dollars a thousand cubic feet for gas because they were so close to Detroit, and Detroit was just hungry for gas. I went broke again, but I've never cared much about the final results. It's the chase that I've enjoyed. I paid for 18 years. Had an office in Great Yarmouth, England, Peterhead, Scotland, Norway. And I had an office in Madrid and London. And I built those boats right on the Santander Bay right there in Biscay, in northern Spain. Nolte Theriot and I had a jet that we operated together. So we took care of our business in about three or four days, and then we'd tour Europe for the next eight, nine days, and then we'd come home. I learned in high school, the best lesson I ever learned, the knowledge, an old English teacher told me during the study periods, the knowledge that you don't have, if you're smart enough to acquire the knowledge you don't have, you're an educated person. So one day my mother said, "What you know about drilling?" I said, "Nothing, but I know I can hire people that do know." And I did. The boat business is the same way. Everything I've ever done. As a result of that, nothing was too dependent on me. All I had to do was read the financials every week, and I could tell you what somebody was doing wrong. That I did know. I understood figures. But I hired the best brains I could get my hands on. Running a bank. What do I know about running a bank?

*So what made you make the switch into the boats?*

Because there was a lot of...unseen financials of people in the boat business, and the profit was unbelievable. That's how I started out, I was building six at a time. I mean, money was so easy for me to borrow. But I couldn't borrow any money locally. If you want to buy a car, you go to Whitney Bank, but if you want money in those days you had to go to Continental Bank in Chicago, you had to go to Manufacturers City Corp in New York. That's where I borrowed most of my money. I'd give them my projections, and they believed in me, they'd see my past record in the drilling and so on and so forth, they knew I knew what I was doing, and so money was easy to borrow.

The boat company was American Offshore. Pipe laying, support vessels. Anchor handling. I specialized in that, I specialized in docking supertankers. For 18 years I docked supertankers at the Barco Refinery in Grand Bahamas. Those big VLCCs, VLCs rather, 1800 foot. Do 110 foot of water. Gigantic things, and I did a lot of rig moving in the Gulf of Mexico. And then for about five years, I hauled steel from Houston to Venezuela. And the contract ended when we sank a barge in the Caiman Islands. We had a big loss there. Barge sank right there. If you've

got to lose a barge that's the best place to lose it. It's a great island, and you can see the bottom in 60, 70 foot of water.

*Did they recover it?*

Oh yeah. We never even removed the strap to remove the steel. They, Murphy Pacific Salvage out of New York, I hired them and they lifted it in about six weeks. My biggest problem there were the pirates. Pirates tried to take over salvage and my boat captain called me at five o'clock in the morning saying, "What do I do?" I said, "Well what are you doing now?" He said, "I'm washing them overboard with a fire hose." I said, "Well, keep washing them overboard." So we were going to Cancun. We were going in the jet to Cancun. We dropped them off and then I came back and from the plane I called Steve McNichols, who was a good friend of mine in the Caiman Islands. He owns a shipping line. And Steve met me at the airport, I had forgotten my passport and everything, I don't know what the hell I was thinking of, but anyway, he got me through, and we went straight to the governor's mansion, and the governor sent two patrol boats with constables, and stayed with me for six weeks patrolling—they arrested all the pirates. They were like drowned rats, trying to get back on the skiff. I had a boat hijacked in the Canary Islands several years ago. Did you know there's more piracy going on now than there was during the days of...They knocked the captain out, they tied him with duct tape and...we carried about 5,000 dollars in the safe. They stole the safe and everything, but they bounded the captain and the whole crew with duct tape, and set the boat adrift. Lucky that they didn't kill any of them. I'll probably live 20 years longer, now that I've gone broke. Because I don't have a boat missing in mid-ocean, I don't have a crew that doesn't show up for work 5,000 miles from here, and when you're a one-man corporation, it's all on your back. You know, you've got employees, but there's so much you can ask of them, you know. But I've enjoyed it, I've enjoyed working all my life.

*So, did you and Nolte actually hook up together?*

Yeah, we had a loose joint venture going. He needed more boats, and I gave him my boats, since he was already established over there, and we operated jointly so I sent some of my people...all of my crews that I had, some of my people in the office to do invoices and stuff like that. Nolte died very young. I think he was 50 years old.

*Okay, we're talking about getting the boat company going.*

Well, in those days, it was very easy to get employees. Now, I understand, it's next to impossible. Well, the biggest problem today, I understand, is if you can get one to pass the drug test. Maybe out of 10, you're lucky if you get two that can make it. But in the days when I was in the business, we didn't have that problem. There was no drug problem, it was non-existent. It's a different generation. But those kids today, their dads never used that stuff. Actually the people that worked for me were deckhands that used to work on oyster or shrimp boats. And they became real good tugboat captains. They were used to the sea, and that was their life. And the money was steady. They made good money.

*Did you have some that would do this, they would bounce back and forth between shrimping and...?*

Not so much on the tugboats as on the drilling rigs. And I don't know, I think because the drilling rig is probably earlier. I think it was an earlier time. But not on the boats because they were on so many days off and so many days on, and they made a full year's income working half a year. And they liked that a lot, so they didn't want to jeopardize... they didn't want to lose their jobs. My captains, I had some for 25 or 30 years that worked for me. They could [fish or shrimp on their days off], see they had enough days off to satisfy their appetite for wanting to fish, but the workover business, that was 365 days a year. I guess that's the biggest reason. I had them working 7 and 7 offshore.

*How many boats... you said you started building six at a time, how many boats did you have?*

I had nine, nine big ones, and then I don't remember how many we bought from Dilsaver, it was 20 or more, a whole bunch of them. But they were less horsepower, like say 300 to 1200 horsepower. But I operated that as a separate fleet, because I wanted to keep the offshore wage, because you couldn't pay the same wage inland that you could pay offshore. So I didn't want to [combine] companies. How do you explain this guy working for the same company making much less? Putting in the same hours. For the reason for that you've got to insure inshore people that would never work offshore. And vice versa, offshore people that would never work inshore. It takes a different breed of man for outside. The hazards are greater inshore than they are offshore, but because of the depth and the size of the ocean, people get scared. And they will not work offshore. But it's more dangerous inshore because you can wipe out a bridge or get hit by a barge, or the traffic is so much confined in a small or narrow space, and then there's fog and stuff that doesn't bother you offshore like it does here. Because radar will show you 20 miles away what's around you.

*So pretty much an inshore captain is an inshore captain. He doesn't want to...?*

He doesn't want to mess offshore and vice versa. It's a different breed.

*So, did you start off right away working in Europe with your boats, or did they start out here?*

I guess I started about three years after I was in the boat business, I started in Europe. I worked the Gulf of Mexico first, and then the Bahamas, and then Caribbean, and then Europe. Nolte had a fleet of boats working already, and he needed some more support vessels, and he knew that I had a bunch of them under construction, and he had a bunch under construction, but he could use all he could get his hands on. So he and I teamed up.

*And business over there? How did that go?*

I went about once a month, about 10 days a month, because I was in the Legislature. I had to take care of those obligations. So I'd go between committee meetings. But I'm always bouncing back and forth. A lot of trips to Europe.

It was just like doing business in this country. Now, I wouldn't do business in Africa, like the Chouests. I talk to Eddie who lives over there. And I said, "Eddie, I would never work there." And everybody who works there tells me it's tough doing business. I've never had to pay anybody, the whole time I was in business I've never offered a bribe or had to pay...and in some of those Third World countries, it's a way of life. But that's not true in Europe. It's not true in France, Germany, it's above board, and it's very legitimate operations. It's really a pleasure doing business over there. And your federal agencies are real up front to help you.

*Speaking of federal agencies and things that changed over time, what would you say were some of the biggies that affected you as a business person?*

Well luckily when I was working, we weren't bothered as much as they are today. The Coast Guard is in your face all the time now. It's a pain in the butt, really. Then the labor unions are trying to break in, and they're not going to succeed. Not in this part of the country. And every time you move there's a new federal...OSHA, they're all foolish regulations. They're something that were made by dry-landers that know nothing about working offshore. Now, in the shipyards, they've created more hazards by forcing people to wear lifejackets while they work, which makes it...the shipyard where I built my boats, they've had more accidents since OSHA has moved in than before OSHA. Because some of the regulations are just...like making them wear a lifejacket while working in the canal, about six feet of water. They fall overboard, they get electrocuted by not being able to...they can't maneuver like they should. And the owner told me, when he sold, he said, "I'm selling because I can't put up with these federal regulations. To hell with it." And he did sell the shipyard. But, they were some of the things we had to put up with. But you see now, we didn't have to go through Coast Guard inspections. My boats were ABS [American Bureau of Standards], all of them ABS. But a supply vessel or a crew boat has to go through... in other words, it's okay if you drown the crew of a tugboat, but don't drown a passenger on a crew boat. Because if they carried passengers... I said, "How about a tug boat?" I said, "Don't get me wrong, I don't want to have to go through the inspections, but why aren't you inspecting the tug boats if you're going to inspect the supply boats? It doesn't make sense." But it goes to show the inconsistencies in the industry. Regulations.

*What about when the licensing for the captains came in?*

That was a disaster. Like Chouest, he's had to open his own schools, you know, to qualify the guys. Because my boys didn't have any problem because they could take the test in French or English. Now, I think they discontinued that. They were oral exams. Now, these boys never had a problem, some of them that went to school, but you send them to England and they'll set sail and they'll be there in record time with no problems at all. They're naturals. They've been doing it since they were six, seven, eight years old, they've been on boats. But I'd hate to be in business today with all the new regulations. I'd just hate to put up with it. I introduced more legislation abolishing legislation than ever passed legislation because I've always been a firm believer that the least rules are the best rules. I believe in very little government. If Congress would meet once every 20 years, this country would be in a hell of a lot better shape. If the Legislature would meet once every 50 years, we'd be in better shape. Because every time the Legislature is in session, taxpayers are in danger. I'm to the right of Attila the Hun, politically.

I'm a registered Democrat but I voted Republican because they're the lesser, and besides, southern Democrats are a lot more conservative than the northern Republicans.

*Once you shifted over to working in Europe and all, were you still working in the Gulf?*

Uh huh. I still had boats over here.

*Would you be able to move your captains from one place to the other, or pretty much...?*

Yeah, some of them wanted to be transferred to Europe, and I would. Some of them wanted to be back at the States, I'd bring them back. But a lot of them wanted to stay in Europe because of the tax advantages. If you stayed without coming home for one full year, you'd get the first 25,000 free. That was a big advantage for those boys. But very few of them ever transferred. But I never had trouble getting crews over the years. Never had a problem.

*What kind of schedules did you have the guys working? What'd they do when they went to the North Sea?*

They worked 7 and 7. They moved their families, everybody. Some of them, it was very traumatic and others it was just a breeze, no problem at all. Yeah. It was hard to break old Cajun habits, though. I went to one of my captains one day, and he said, "Oh, Mr. Guidry, I'm glad you're here." He said, "My wife Jeanne is cooking ducks tonight. Just like we cook at home." I said, "Jerry, where'd you get ducks?" "Oh," he said, "the Queen got a lake that's full of them." I said, "What you mean, you go hunting?" "Oh no, no, no...I go by the feed store, I buy me some corn, and the ducks followed me to the trunk of my car. When I got 15, I closed the trunk. I brought them home, fed them corn for about two or three weeks so I can purge them, then I ring their necks." I said, "You're going to wind up in jail, bro." But he got away with it. He said, "Mr. Guidry, I cooked one of those big geese one day..." I said, "What you mean a big goose?" Well, he described it. It was a swan. And he said the damn thing, he says, "It got out after eight hours, it jumped out and ran away," he said. That's how tough that old bird was. Once a Cajun, always a Cajun, aren't going to break those old habits because they're law violators like you can't believe. A Cajun doesn't believe too much in being ruled, you know, he's very free-spirited. One of them told me the other day, he says, "I never go hunting during open seasons." He'd get killed over there, you gotta go when the season's closed. Nobody bothers you.

## 6. A FISHING COMMUNITY

Steven Charpentier, a retired shrimper and avid duck carver, draws a parallel between the demise of the French language in south Louisiana and the future of fishing. He urges his children and grandchildren to go to school and find a trade other than fishing:

“Can’t do it no more. It’s just like French speaking that people want to bring back. It’s too far gone. Our sons and daughters don’t speak no French to us – with me and Mom right here. They speak English. It’s that way now. My mother and dad wouldn’t know how to speak English so we was all a French speaking community.”

Academic observers are quick to point out that the integrity of a community or a society does not need to be grounded in the persistence or revival of the traditional language. Cajunism is a case in point. The majority of people in south Louisiana would call themselves Cajun. Like Steven’s progeny, they don’t speak much French, but they share a heritage of close families, favored foods, shared historical experiences, and a resourcefulness to adapt to a fluid and changing natural environment. While oil and gas became the economic drivers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fishing is an integral piece of that shared heritage.

This heritage has been severely tested in recent decades. There are physical threats. Ile de Jean Charles, a settlement in neighboring Terrebonne Parish, is quickly going under water. People can argue about the cause: land subsidence, sea-level rises, global warming, marsh erosion. Regardless, it is going under. The diversion of fresh water from the Mississippi into the disappearing marsh holds out some hope for slowing the erosion process, but the diversions caused havoc with oyster beds and oysters: the bays were “freshened” beyond an acceptable range of salinity for the organisms. The “dead zone” of reduced oxygen and, perhaps, pollution runoff, periodically extends far out into the Gulf, debilitating fish and their food. And the vagaries of weather, such as unseasonal cold fronts or higher than normal rainfall, can disrupt cycles of spawning, growth, and migration of fish and shrimp.

This fishing heritage is threatened as well by global trade. In recent years, imports of farm-raised shrimp from Asia and Latin America have been flooding the local markets. A temporary alliance of ruggedly individualistic shrimpers won some short-term protection through tariffs, but this remedy is uncertain. Local politics along the Gulf of Mexico are likewise a threat. Power has shifted from commercial to recreational fishermen. Bans on certain technologies, such as the gill net, have been imposed. Species that were once exploited commercially are now reserved for the sports fishermen. Gillnetters once kept the population of drumfish in check. These fish were always voracious consumers of oysters. Now the drum is a sport fish, and not a highly prized one. Recreational fishers don’t keep their populations down, and oyster harvesters can’t keep the drum off their beds.

But the biggest threat to the fishing heritage of south Louisiana is posed by the conflict of interests among the fishermen themselves. Shrimping is the most transparent example. Offshore trawlers capture shrimp as they grow and migrate out into the open waters of the Gulf. Inshore shrimpers in shallow-draft boats, cheaper to operate than the big boats, catch shrimp in the bays, bayous, and estuaries inshore. They take shrimp before they mature to full size and move out to

deeper water. Refugees from the war in Indochina, a population of diverse nationalities generically called “the Vietnamese,” were inserted into this mix, and their success caused resentment. But an attitude, characteristic of fishermen throughout the United States, is that all people have the right to fish. Steven Charpentier and others think there are simply too many fishermen pursuing a limited resource. But they are resigned to this.

### **6.1. Wilbert Collins (July 18, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*Wilbert Collins describes himself as an oyster farmer, one of the few who continue traditional ways of collecting seed oysters from public grounds, transferring them to private reefs for growth, then moving them again to saline waters to get the desired “salty” taste prior to market. Such labor-intensive practices have fallen out of favor with many contemporary oystermen, due to increasing wage costs and an uncertain market. In fact, Wilbert, as a leader in the Louisiana Oyster Task Force, spends a great deal of his time battling the Food and Drug Administration’s efforts to curtail the trade in raw oysters.*

My name is Wilbert Collins from Golden Meadow, Louisiana. [We] lived in Grand Isle a few years then moved back here. We have a summer home in Grand Isle. Third generation in the oyster business and my son is the fourth generation. I worked oysters for about 50 years, 51 years. And I am kind of slowing down. I am staying off the boats and staying more on land.

*So in business, you are both a fisherman and a distributor, or processor?*

Just a fisherman. I ship my oysters to some dealers and I have one retailer that I have over here and handle myself. Most of my oysters are shipped to New Orleans.

*Has it been steady over the years or does it fluctuate?*

Since '90, we had a big problem with the FDA. We had a sickness in the oysters. People got sick over eating raw oysters. It really put the business down. We brought it up a little since then. The price came up a little too but not for the expense we have.

Back in the '50's, well it was before that, but that is when I started, when the oil companies wanted to go to one of our bedding grounds or when they wanted to put a pipeline they had to pass through one of our bedding grounds and they didn't think they should pay us. They wanted everything for nothing. They rather spread their money somewhere else than give it to the oyster fisherman. We had a lot of trouble with the oil companies because of that. They really put a lot of money into the community but they took billions out and put a couple million back. I am talking back in the '30's and '40's when I was a real young fellow. They did what they wanted and they pumped some oil out of south Louisiana here and the damage they did they never left enough money for the land damage they did. So, they did a lot of good, but a lot of bad too.

*How would they approach an oyster businessman?*

Sometimes they wouldn't bother and sometimes they would go to the Wildlife and Fisheries.

*So it would be up to the oystermen to cover their own turf?*

Yes, we had defend our own turf and they didn't like that. They complained to the Governor and senators. It was a botheration to them and we shouldn't be there. They should be there. We are putting a few millions and we shouldn't be trying to take money from them and stop them from passing through our bedding grounds. It wasn't right, but we lived with it. Most of the time we got paid, but they didn't like it. We would sell them a right-of-way. They go through the lease for what they wanted.

*Is there any way you could change their direction if they were on your prime ground?*

They didn't like it but they did it. They didn't want to pay the money it would have cost. To them 30,000 dollars was nothing but not to give that to us. My grandfather started a business back in the '30's, so we been here a long time. We still have some of the same leases.

*How does the leasing system work in general?*

Well, you go to the Wildlife and Fisheries and you make an application. From there, they will send a crew out there and survey it. Today it is more difficult than in the past. They will survey it and you and them sign it and they will send you a plat. [The leases are good for] 15 years then you can renew it for another 15 years. There is no limit on how long you can keep it. They have natural beds, but the lease is mainly for planting. For the last few years people have been getting away from planting. Too expensive. They are going mostly to selling wild oysters. I am one of the few that is left that plants. In Lafourche Parish, I am the only one. You have to go to Plaquemines Parish to see people that plant.

*So, it's all a matter of cost and not a new generation of guys that don't do it the old way?*

That is part of it too. We have trouble with drumfish and other fish coming and eat what we plant.

*Do you have to move the oysters to any other place to purify them?*

Not me. There are a couple of companies that do that. One in Houma and one in Franklin. They pasteurize it or something and they are not as good. It is a dead raw oyster. When people want to eat oysters they want to eat a live raw oyster. All the bacteria is dead but the oyster is dead too. But, the FDA wants that and they want to shut the oyster business down because of the bacteria.

*What happens over time when the oil companies dig canals through the marsh? Is that a detriment to the oyster population or does it open up some area where beds can develop?*

Through the years it has hurt us, too much opening. Every canal they dug in the marsh had to be filled with water so it was bringing the current in faster. The more water that comes in causes the marsh to get eaten up faster with the current. Our marsh is soft. It hurt the land the most. It brought a different kind of water in and the land was getting eaten up faster and making bigger

lakes. It brought more salt water in. After they started building these canals, it took so much water to fill them and now the land is all going. Now they are crying that Louisiana is losing 50 miles of land each year, but back in the '30's they didn't think of that. Any oil company that wanted a permit would get it. They didn't worry about 2001. It was the oil companies, they had all the money and had most of Baton Rouge all sold out.

*Anything more recent in terms of interactions with oil companies? Are they getting better, more aware of the impacts?*

Some, but not all. But, they have changed a lot. Most of the oil companies are all going. Texaco was very active and the toughest oil company around. They wanted to walk over you and smash you and get away with it. Gulf sold everything they had and went offshore. Well, Gulf sold out completely. We never had any problem with Chevron. They were never around the oyster business. Exxon wasn't too bad.

*Were there any big companies out on Grand Isle?*

Later on they got another one that came there. I can't remember the name, but it's not there anymore. Now they have British Petroleum. They don't bother us too much. We had one case with them. They didn't want to pay us either. They were new here and they didn't know what the deal was. I remember back in the '40's, my grandfather stopped Gulf from dredging one of our bedding grounds. He went out there and put his boat in front of the dredge. He wasn't going to let them destroy our life. But, of course, the big boys in New York and Houston, they didn't care. They used to tell the little guy to go over there and put in this pipeline. The guy would tell them how much it would cost to buy the oyster leases. They would tell them, "Well don't even fool with that." In Texas, back in the '30's, they didn't have any bedding grounds. They did what they wanted in Galveston Bay. When they moved to Louisiana, there were fishermen with bedding grounds. Now today they have bedding grounds in Galveston. They didn't know what was going on over here.

*Why was it different over there in Texas?*

It was all public grounds. There weren't too many oyster fishermen in Texas. Back in the '30's, Louisiana was supplying a lot of oysters. We had enough oysters for everybody. Back in the '30's, the oysters started dying and Louisiana had a shortage. Fishermen started moving to Texas and they supplied the demand. I think that is how Texas got involved.

*So even back in the '30's there were bedding grounds and leases?*

Yes. That goes back to the 1800's. There weren't many way back then, but there were a few. In the 1900's, there were more. Back then they didn't know how to create a system to have these bedding grounds.

*So is there any reason why the oysters were dying in the '30's?*

It was a big loss that lasted 30 years. The oil companies were to blame. They were just walking in and had started drilling. It was them. Biologists came down from Texas A&M and they found some disease in the saltwater. Where the disease come from, nobody knows...from a well, from offshore.

*Do you see any trouble with the "dead zone"?*

Yes, they had one in Grand Isle last week. I don't know where they come from. I talked to a lot of biologists, but they just tell me it is water with no oxygen. Do you know what causes that?

*Well, over in Alabama, I was talking to the Alabama Director of Fisheries. They are having problems over there also. Over there, Mobile Bay people are getting blamed. This guy is saying well you have the whole river system coming down through Mobile Bay bringing a lot of pesticide runoff. So it is a much bigger problem for people around the bay.*

Sometimes the trailers pass with acid and they pump that into those rigs offshore. I think if something breaks and that acid goes into the water it is going to kill everything. They are supposed to bring it back to shore, but you know.

*There are stories in the early years when oil was moving offshore that a lot of shrimpers got involved in transporting supplies. Were oystermen involved in that too?*

No, our boats weren't big enough. Our boats are not made for the Gulf, they are made for shallow water. Shrimp boats were made for the Gulf. When they started the offshore business, they needed boats to bring supplies to the rigs. So, some of the shrimpers took the job.

*Even though you are all commercial fisherman you don't interact much with the other kinds of fishermen—the shrimpers and all?*

No, I have enough with mine. For the last ten years, I have been traveling with my association helping them out, going to Washington. Friday we leave for Virginia for a convention with the FDA. All of my time is only with oyster dealings. I know the shrimpers, but we just talk like that. Oystering is a full-time job. The problem is that the FDA wants us to stop selling raw oysters and we don't want to stop. And, we don't want to sell a dead oyster, we want to sell a live raw oyster, something with flavor. So, that is what we are going up there for.

The companies put millions in Louisiana, but they took billions out. They left us with a big hole. Of course, the money helps when they put it out and give out jobs. But, they hurt our marsh. They made it happen faster. Now, everybody is worried about it because Louisiana is being washed away fast. They are coming out with these freshwater diversions. It might help, but I don't see where. It is not going to help that much. It is just too much. The only thing that could save our coast right now is rocks and you'd have to bring all the mountains from Arkansas over here.

*We were over in Ile de Jean Charles the other day. That is disappearing.*

I used to go to that place to hire some men on a mud road. It is 20 years I haven't gone over there. Is it black-topped now?

*Yes.*

That was a tough place to go. If it wouldn't be for all of these canals, the water wouldn't come in as fast to eat up the marsh. You would have to make a rock levee around Louisiana to stop the water and that is not going to happen so Louisiana is just going to get eaten away.

*Do people talk here about global warming and sea level rises?*

No, people don't even worry about that. I don't know why. I guess because they think they will be gone by the time it happens. So, why worry about it. We should be trying to stop it but we are not... I think is it a shame that a place like this that furnished the gas, oil, shrimp, and oysters and we don't have better highways than we have. We have a new highway in the back here that they started 20 years ago. They didn't make more than 20 miles on it. It doesn't seem real. You see, Florida, they don't want oil and gas. They don't want those people around. They want gas for their car and their houses but they don't want the oil spills and all. But, they have the best roads in the world. Louisiana has everything and the worst roads in the world.

*Is your operation affected at all by recreational fishermen or any regulations...?*

They don't like us either. They are like the oil company. It's not too bad. We have trouble with them. They have a name for their club. I don't know what they call themselves, but they are really strong in Baton Rouge. They tried to pass a law to take our leases away. It calmed down now. I can't remember everything about them. Like I told you earlier about the drumfish eating the oysters, well, they stopped us from catching the drumfish so they don't eat our oysters. We used to catch them with gill nets. It is a very cheap fish and one that is really not needed and it's one of the most populated fish in the water. Now, we can't destroy them because the sport fishermen don't want you to... The fishermen have been doing it ever since time began and they still have more fish than ever. It is not the fishermen that are destroying the fish. Year after year they populate so much. What destroys them is the dead zone, freezes, and all. The only time fish don't come back the next year is because you have a big freeze that kills all the fish and it's three or four years before they come back. But, again, it is not the fishermen that did that. It is nature.

## **6.2. Whitney Dardar (July 14, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*Whitney Dardar, father of the current chairwoman of the United Houma Nation, is a professional fisherman, moving from shrimp to oysters with the seasons. Like many other residents of the region who grew up on the water, Whitney tried his hand in oil work. He drove crew boats and supply boats out of Morgan City for about 10 years, then returned to fishing. Although he himself rigs up with a skimmer to shrimp the inland lakes, channels, and bayous, he acknowledges the conundrum of Louisiana shrimping. The inshore season targets young, small*

*shrimp before they mature and migrate offshore to be caught by the large offshore trawlers. With depressed prices and rising costs of fuel, many shrimpers are selling their offshore equipment and moving into skimmers, and the problem gets worse.*

I been living in Golden Meadow all of my life. I been trawling most of my life. I started working on the crew boat, the supply boat, for a while. I was a roustabout. Most of my life was fishing. I started when I was 16 years old. I trapped a little bit with my daddy. Not too much. He was fishing. Fishing, trawling, and trapping. But when they started then, it was a different job than us. It was all by hand and it was a different rig. Now it is all changed. When they started, they started working with oysters and it was all by hand with tongs and all. Trawling was the same way. For trawling, they were using like a seine net. That was used to catch the shrimp like they catch the fish. When my daddy was fishing, they used to throw the cast net. When they first started, they couldn't sell the shrimp fresh like that. They used to boil it and dry it and sell it dry. They used to paddle that pirogue from here to Leeville. They used to go early in the morning, throw the cast net. Then they would come back, boil the shrimp, dry it, and that is how they used to sell it. They would sell it to some of the dealers that used to buy the dried shrimp. It wasn't shrimp sheds like we have now.

Then they used to pick moss. They would pick up moss and dry moss. They used to make a living with that. They had different ways to make a living. They used to pick up moss, trap, fish. When I started, it was different and it kept on improving and improving. Now we have two seasons. Before, they didn't have seasons like we have now. They used to trap the winter and in summer used to go shrimp. It wasn't like we do now. Now, we have seasons. They had a time when in winter they used to trap. Then, in Lent they used to crab. After that they used to shrimp a little bit. Crabbing wasn't like it is now. Now, they use crab traps that could catch crabs 24 hours a day and 12 months out of the year. Then, they used to set a line out. You have a line out and then you pass the line with a net. When they would stop in the evening, they would pick up the line. That was only during Lent. Now, they fish crab every day all year long.

*So, when did they fish oysters? Would they fish oysters and trap at the same time?*

No. They trap and then they go do the oysters. After the oysters, they fish crab. After that, they fish shrimp.

*Now, with the oysters, they used the tongs. When you were little, did you help with that?*

Yes. We still use that. I still have a pair of tongs. People still fish a few in shallow water and shell one at a time. Before, it was all fishing by hand. Now, they use a winch with a dredge. I have a dredge on my new boat.

*Where do you do your oystering? Do you have your own bed?*

Yes. Right back of Bayou Rosa. I have a lease in Laurier Bay. It is pretty good. I have one in Laurier Bay that is open right now. During the winter, at certain times it is closed because it is polluted. This time it is open. When it opens, it opens in May and sometimes in April and sometimes in May. This year it will be May. In May, though, I am not fishing oyster because I

am trawling. During May, the oysters are skinny. We don't fool with it. What I have to do is take them out while they are open like right now and bring them in places that stay open. That is what I do—take them from there and bring them to places that stay open all of the time. During the winter, they stay closed for a few months. The way it is polluted...I have a place. At one end of the bayou, this side is good and the other side is polluted. That is why they think they have to draw a line somewhere. That is how it works. It is like it doesn't make sense, but that is how they do it. Before, when my daddy and I used to fish like that, they didn't have such things as polluted oysters. Now, there are so much things going in the water and all. Before, when I first started with oysters, before I had a lease, we used to go fish all over. Now, if you have a lease, you can't go fish oysters. There is no such thing as wild oysters, which they always had. Now, you have to lease from the state to fish. Before, you could go fish or hunt anywhere. Now, a lot of places are closed for fishing and oystering. So, it is all changed.

*Do you lease it every year?*

Yes. As long as you pay your lease. It is like your rent. As long as you pay your lease, it is yours. When you stop paying it, they cancel your application. We pay two dollars an acre on a lease. We started at a dollar an acre and it went up to two an acre. As long as you pay your lease, it is yours. It gives you something to do during the closed [shrimp] season.

*Could you pass your lease to somebody else or does it have to be...?*

Yes. Like if I would want to pass it to my grandkids or to someone, I could pass it to them. Now, as long as they would keep paying the lease, we could change the papers. It has to be somebody not under 18. I could pass it on to them. That has been going since them guys who came from Yugoslavia came down here. They have been working oysters since I could remember. They make a fortune in the oyster business. They pass it to the younger generation and it goes down.

*If you didn't have any children or grandchildren to pass it down to, could you sell it to...?*

Yes, you could sell it. Some allow you to sell it. Now, since they started putting that freshwater diversion a lot of them lost their bedding grounds, but they got paid for it. They lost so much bedding grounds because of the freshwater. The state spent all kinds of money on that. Once you got a lease like that, they pass a grade or something on the ground because they messed up the bottom. So, they had to pay you.

*How do you know that they have done that?*

They usually call you when they want to go and do something like that. The oil company has to let you know because you have a lease there. If they want to pass a rig or something, they have to let you know. Like to go dynamite, they have to send you a letter. They're going to mess up your ground. Sometimes they come with a rig and they have to cut a canal to pass through. They have to pay you something for it.

*Are they pretty generous about that?*

Yes, some of them are pretty generous. Some might give you a little time. Some of them usually pay you all right. I had some company passing through my lease. I did not have any trouble with them. It is just like the skimmer and the trawling. They are not supposed to go pass through your bedding grounds either. The way they pull their skimmer will mess you up to. A lot of them have to knock your pole down to get through. We have trouble with that, too. But, besides that, it is okay. We never had too much trouble. Now, when I first started my canal, I had trouble with them boats with dynamite and now they stopped. When I first lease that, I had a lot of trouble. Now, I don't have no trouble with them. They finally quit.

*Did you notice they were going through and had to go find somebody?*

Well, the barges used to pass there and it happened so that I could come through the canal and see them going through my lease. They were passing and would put down. Me, I travel there almost every day. It happened that I passed and they were put down. Some of them, they stay overnight. Next day they leave and you don't know. You see the damage. I've already seen my place. When they get stuck, those big tug boats with a barge...I didn't know who it was. I didn't catch them. Every one that I caught so far, it was all right. When I do oystering, sometimes I sleep out there. I caught some that way too. Now, once in a while, I have some of the crab men who are friends with me. They already called me to let me know that I had damage on my bedding ground. So, I go and check them out. If nobody passes, they could come, stay a while, and leave and it could be a couple of days. You see the damage, but you don't know who it was.

*So, do you mark off your bedding grounds?*

I have sticks and signs all over to mark it. When they put down, that is the first thing they say is that they didn't see the sign. But, I have signs all over. A lot of times I say, "Well look, you have some right close to the barge." They try to get away with it.

*Do you deal with the barge captain or the company?*

The company. I always go to the captain of the tug boat and then the company. After that, I go to the office. I always make the captain sign before he leaves there on a piece of paper. I used to have my camera and take their picture to make sure that if anything happened I would have proof. If you are by yourself, you would have nothing signed. They could say that they have never been there. That is what I used to do. I would have a pencil and a paper and make them sign. I would write the time and the date that it was on. You have to call their company and if they don't pay you, you have to find a lawyer. Then, you would have to get a guy to come and check your damage and all that. So far, I have been fairly good and I haven't had too much trouble. They ask me about how much damage they caused.

*How do you determine how much of the damage they should have to pay?*

You see how much they take out and you figure out how long it will take for it to settle back down before you put something. You also have to see how much oysters they buried. That is how much oysters you are going to lose. Once they dig, it takes a while for that bottom to set up again. There you are losing. You figure out how much you are going to lose. They know they are wrong, so they come with it. They know it is them. I had that happen sometimes two or three times a year. Now, it has been a while since they did that or that I have seen it. They might be aware that I know and that I am watching.

*From one year to the next, are the beds pretty much the same or does the production vary?*

For the oysters? It all depends. Some seasons you have some good seasons and sometimes you don't. You know what hurt us a lot is the drumfish. Before they used to fish the drumfish, they used to go net them. But now they passed a law that you can't net no more. Now, we are getting more and more drumfish. That tears you up, sometimes in one night. That is something that we have more and more of. We can't fish them no more. That is why we have so many. That hurts a lot. Sometimes if you get a hurricane, it might mess you up. So far, we have been lucky. We didn't have any hurricanes. Another thing that messes up the oysters is the snails. Mostly it is the drumfish that kill the oysters. I lost a good bit that way. They have some seasons that they grow real good. The water can't be too salty or too fresh. It has to be just right. Some seasons they might be good and some seasons it might not be good to grow much. It all depends on your water. You don't want too much fresh water but you don't want too much salt either. The salt water has been coming in. That was a problem with the fresh water for a lot of people in the east. When it first started, Barataria Bay used to be full of oysters. Now, they are having to move further in because of the salt water. Oysters don't grow like that any more because there is too much salt. They are moving the oysters more in to get away from that salt water. When they turned that fresh water, that messed them up too. That was too much fresh water. Now, maybe it might do some good. They might build up a little bit more. Now, the salt water is going in that you have to go more and more in for your oysters for them to grow. Maybe in a few years, it might do some good. I know a lot of places where oysters used to grow that they don't grow anymore. Now, it is like the Gulf; it is all open. They are trying to restore and all but I think they are about 20 years too late for that. They pump and pump all that oil and don't put nothing back. It sinks and sinks and sinks. That is what happened to our property down here. Once they start cutting the canal and all of that and they drill, they eat up the land more and more. That messes up a lot. Right across the bayou here, there used to be land. We used to set some traps there. Now, the water is all the way to the road. In the front there, they used to have a bunch of houses. They used to plant big gardens. You can see the levee from here. That is close. That is all water. That is how much it has been eaten up since I've been here and it is still being eaten up. I had my uncle that used to trawl with me. When they was trawling, they had one ice boat and the rest was to trawl and unload on the ice boat. It was a freight boat. Now, you have platform lights all over. Then, you had nothing. It was dark. You had to find that little canal that you come in from. Now, it is all open and no matter how small the boat is, it carries its own ice. When I first started, I worked on one like that. I went one there and made 20 days. I stayed out and unloaded to a freight boat. But, that is all I made—20 days. Then, I quit because that wasn't no money. So, I got off.

*So, you would do all of the trawling...you would keep trawling and the freight boat would come to you or did you have to go find it somewhere?*

You had to go find him. He was anchored somewhere. All of the little boats would tie onto him and unload their catch and go back and trawl. When I first started, I did that. But, I only stayed 20 days. I made 50 dollars in 20 days. That was when I first started. After that, I went to work on a big boat. Then, I got my own. My daddy started on a little boat. I had my little boat. I was working 7 and 7. I worked there for a few years. Then, it used to be better. It was a pretty good living. Everything is changing. We have no price for our shrimp and all. I guess that is how it goes.

*These freight boats, the ice boats, were they owned by people down here?*

Some companies. They had the shrimp shed right here. Pelican Seafood had one. The Venet Company had one. They used to give so much to the trawler. They didn't weigh the shrimp. They would come with this big thing called a China basket and they would fill it up and dump. If they had a little bit left, they would just give it. You know how much those little boats lost by doing that? They lost a lot. Now when you come and unload, they weigh your shrimp.

*What would they do with the shrimp? Would they can them or what?*

I guess they canned them like they do now. They used to haul it to the market or factory in New Orleans. I guess the factory must have canned them, too. It is just like they do now. They buy it from here and haul it to factories in New Orleans. There is a factory in Dulac and they haul it to the market. There, they can it and ship it all over. I guess they send frozen shrimp, too. I don't know. It is just like they do the oysters. Before, we used to have a big factory that would steam the oysters. I worked there for a little while unloading the boats. They used to steam oysters and can them right there. Now, we don't have enough oysters to have factories to steam them. The oysters that they do have, they make sack oysters. They had a canning place in Harvey and one in Mississippi. But, I don't know if they still have steaming factories around because we don't have the oysters that we used to have. I remember in that place, we used to bed oysters from across the river and bring them into Barataria Bay. We would bring them in September and when it would come the season to steam them we would pick them up. They were big and beautiful oysters. Now they don't grow like that.

*How long does it take to build up an oyster bed? How long would it take until it was actually any good?*

It doesn't take too long. We put plenty shells to make a reef. Then, we haul our oysters in there so they don't bury themselves in the mud. Some places have a ground that is hard enough. There are places that they start growing by themselves, too. Some places, people put them in there and they would grow, but the snails would get them so you have to pick them up. Some places with a lot of salt water will have snails that will eat them up. You harvest them during the season. In the old days, they used to build a fence to keep them in. I don't know if you have the right to do that these days, but that is what they used to do.

*So, you said your father did oysters before they had leases? How did they do that?*

When he started oystering, they used to go fish 'coon oysters. He didn't do much of that. After that, he went to work for an oyster boat. They worked for Amar. They had this little boat that they used to tow. My daddy wasn't too much for going and fishing and oystering on his own. He always wanted to be with somebody else. He also used to trap and shrimp. I did that too. I worked awhile with somebody else for different companies working oysters and I decided to get my own because it is not that hard. If you can do it, you can do it.

*When you are working for a company, would they pay your gas and...?*

No, they would pay you so much a day. But, they were right here in Galliano and Cut Off. They had a bunch of boats so we used to go work for them. They would pay so much a day. It was like a job. They had their own boats. They just hired you to go on the boat.

*When you were working on your own, would you always sell to the same person?*

No, we would sell to different places. If you sell only to one, they would think that they owned you. It is better to have different companies. Everybody sells to different places. It is just like trawling. One has a different price and one has a little bit more. They always have some that are 10 or 15 cents more than the other. So, you have to watch that. It is just like the fuel. Someone has the fuel a little bit higher. The ice is a little higher at some places. Those are all things that you have to watch too. At the end of the year, it all adds up.

*When you come in with a load of shrimp or a load of oysters, you don't know what these various sheds are going to pay for them? Do you go from one place to the other?*

When you come in, you know the price of what they are. You know the prices of all of the factories. They always talk about that on the radio. You hear that on the radio and you know what they pay and you know which one you want to go to. So you know what is going on. It is always on the radio.

*But the factories can talk to each other, can't they?*

Yes. The three down here in Leeville, I think they work together. It looks like when the moon changes, the prices go down. When the season opens in a different place, the price goes down. That's three factories that work together. I think they talk to each other. They have the same price. Then, they have another one, Thomassies, who has a different price. He always has 10 or 15 cents more than them. The Vietnamese have a factory and they always have 10 or 15 cents more than them. Them three work together though. That is how they work. When the season opens, the price goes down. When the moon changes, the price goes down.

*You said there is a Vietnamese factory?*

Yes, there are two of them. Lafont used to pack shrimp right there but he sold it to the Vietnamese. Most of the big boats now are all Vietnamese. The people from around here with big boats, they sold to the Vietnamese. They are getting bigger and bigger. They own shrimp sheds and ice plants now. They came over here and went into business. We have a lot them that's crabbing too. The only thing they didn't go into was oystering. They went in the trawling business, shrimping business, and the crab, but the oystering business doesn't have too many of them in there. I don't know if they find it hard or what but they didn't go in that business. I think they have more of them crabbing than people from here. Crabs went down to 20 or 30 cents a pound and sometimes they choke because they can't sell. There are too many right now that is in there.

*Was there a lot of resentment when the Vietnamese came in and went into the big boats?*

When they first came here, they had some little boats. They were buying all kinds of old boats. They used to go in those little boats with the whole family—the women, the kids, and the whole family. They started buying bigger boats and building them. They was good workmen. They would build their own boats. They said that it was Caterpillar that used to back them up. That is why we are so much in the fishing business right now. They got all these people from that way that is in there. They came down here from where they come from and I guess they were all fishermen too because they knew everything about fishing when they came down here. When they first came, they were the first to start with those nets. They called them stick nets. They were fishing with that. Then, they made a law so they had to quit that. Now, we use those swing nets, those skimmers, which is even worse than what they were using. But, it is legal.

*How did the local people react to the Vietnamese?*

There was not much they could do. They just let them fish. There was nothing they could do. They came and started buying boats. Some had old boats, sold them, and bought new ones. The Vietnamese would buy from them. They would build their boats and we would buy from them. After a while, they started building bigger and bigger boats. But, they bought a lot of boats from people around here. People would change boats and they would buy the boats.

*When you are trawling, do you have a particular place that you always go to or everyday do you search around?*

No, when you go out there you search around. You know the places where the shrimp usually are so you go check all them places. It is not all places that have shrimp. It works a little different now than before. Now, you have those islands where the shrimp used to come that is now all open. Before, you had more islands and now it is all open. That is what makes it hard with the crab and the trawling. You have all those crab traps and sometimes they are like this and you can't pass your trawl through. What is bad is that the shrimp pass through the same places where the crab traps are. They go with the current. That is how it works. That is another thing that they could do if they wanted to—make a season for the crab. If they would have a season for the crab...you see, like right now the season is closed...when the season is closed,

they would fish crab. Then, we would make the August season. August season closes in December. As soon as August season closes, they could fish crab until the May season opens. They would have the same amount of time to fish crabs as we would to trawl. They say, "Well, what are we going to do during the trawling season?" Just like us, they would have to find something to do. When the May season closes, we have over a month of no season. It would be just the same. The ones that fish crabs have boats, so they could go trawling during the trawling season. Some of them just crab though. It makes it hard on the trawlers. They lose money and we lose money. They lose traps and we lose time. You catch that in your trawl, it takes a while to get that out. You lose a lot of time. It is hard on boats. They pay high for their crab traps and we have expenses. It is hard for both of us and I don't see why Wildlife and Fisheries don't make a season for it. I guess that is how they do it. That is the only thing that doesn't have a season. Everything else has a season and a limit. That has no limit on how many traps a man can put in the water. One man can have a license and put 1,000 traps if he wanted. The other thing they did that I don't think is right is that they stopped selling licenses for crabbing because they said they had too many in it. It is not that. They should have a season on it and a limit on how many traps you could put. A man, to make a living, doesn't need a lot of traps. Some people have 700 or 800 traps. I think a man could make a living with 300 traps.

*Is Wildlife and Fisheries looking into this? Are they trying to do something about it?*

They don't enforce nothing. They aren't doing nothing about it. It is like the trawling, there is not one fisherman wants the same thing. It seems like they should have a season and a limit. I think it would work out better for everybody.

*One of the things that we are talking to people about is how the oil and gas industry affected people who were living here. You talked a little bit about it—about the canals and when the companies would come in. When do you remember first when the oil and gas companies were around?*

It was long ago that it started and it came more and more. I was young when they started that. When I first started trawling, there were plenty of rigs in the bay. They still have the structures that are there but the rig isn't. That is why there are all of those canals. Every time they would dig the well, they would cut for pipelines. That eats up the land. I think that is what hurt our oysters and our seafood, what is thrown in the water. A lot of people don't know what is being thrown in that water, but there is a lot of stuff being thrown in that water. Before, we didn't have such things as polluted fish and oysters and things like that that we have now. There are a lot of things that go into the water that we don't see. I have proof. I saw it somewhere. I used to work on them boats, tug boats. They used to haul drums of things and go way offshore and dump it. When you throw that, it explodes. That couldn't have been good for our seafood. That was a long time ago.

### **6.3. Steven Charpentier (July 12, 2002; Galliano, LA)**

*Steven shrimped for 47 years, mainly on wooden boats until he bought his last boat, a steel 72 footer, Mom and Dad. His son-in-law crewed with him on that boat, and Steven sold the boat to him, at no interest, to be paid when he could. The son-in-law also has a license to run crew boats. Under Governor Edwards, Steven served on a task force attempting to set up sanctuaries*

*and revise the inshore season so that shrimp had time to grow larger before capture. Both of these efforts failed, due to the offshore shrimpers, such as Steven, being outvoted by the inshore and bay shrimpers on the task force. During the interview, Steven kept coming back to the main problem with Louisiana shrimping: the ever-growing number of inshore shrimpers are catching small shrimp. But, he said, this is a democracy and you can't control the number of shrimpers. He sees the trend of big-boat trawlers converting to small boats – much cheaper to operate – so the problem will get worse. The inshore May season was a disaster, due to low prices caused by a flood of imports.*

By the fourth of September that's when your white shrimp is going to move to the coastline.

*But the browns are already out there right?*

Oh yeah. That's from May first all the way to June, July and they are going to work theirself out. May, June, July, and August, and September and October till December. Keep going out. The more cold fronts you got the more deep they go. Right now, you got some boats that fish 200 feet of water, and maybe more than that too. Got to go in there deep especially when you don't have no more price for your shrimps. So you want to try to catch the bigger ones too, because you would have to catch a whole lot of the small ones to make up. So if you have a bigger boat then you have to catch the bigger shrimp. This boat here, he's going there [talking about son's boat]. He's probably going to try to fish where he can head the shrimp on the boat. Because you head this shrimp when the shrimp is big enough for the price to at least go close to three dollars a pound. And really I do not know if they will be able to do that. You know, it all depends because those two cold fronts that we had, latter part of March and in April...Those guys in Texas, they send me a pamphlet on what they found and what it says. So they said they are three weeks behind with this cold front. That put the season three weeks behind. And while they can't open it later than the fifteenth of July they would even have to go further but the law is they got to open it, that's the most they can go. So if they could go more that would mean that the shrimp had a chance to grow somewhat bigger before you go out there and open it. But then another thing could happen. They can go out and swim all the way to the other side of Brownsville. That's Mexico. Not allowed to trawl there. They try to see that they still catch their shrimp... what comes out of Texas that is caught can be brought to Texas and not go into the Mexican territory. So it's on account of nature, what nature is going to do.

Like what happened in all those floods ...it might not be good. It could be small shrimp...push them all. Just like a storm that could have happened there. As bad as a storm. Storms push a lot of water, a lot of rain. Flushes all those chemicals that people nowadays have. Why, you did not have all of that in the years back. You did not have to spray. I don't know why. You got more insects now then you have ever had. If you're growing some tomato there and you don't got that seven doz....what they call it? I don't know what they call it in English. But they are going to sting your tomato, you know? And your tomato is not going to be good. So you got to put that medicine on it. And everybody does that too. You got sugarcane or milo or whatever you have. You got to spray it.

*We were talking about the dead zone. Do you see that, when all those chemicals come down and everything dies?*

That must come from in the river. That must flush out of the river and it can go up to Texas over there, that zone. And it affects the Gulf because usually when at the end of the season like it is right now you go straight offshore right there and those that you didn't catch on the beach would be out there but now it is like a dead zone. They are not there like they used to be. On account of no oxygen. They test that. Biologists go out there. There's a dead zone. There is no oxygen. So nothing grows in that part of the area. You went to Grand Island?

*Yeah.*

Well, Leeville there, along this bayou. Right now the season is closed, you know. Waiting on the white shrimp season. That will be in August. Third week of August, it is going to re-open. And it will be for the late shrimp, you know? And then as soon as the cold fronts start coming in, that shrimp drift on outside on the Gulf. And then we have a bigger boat...this is...used to be my boat. And I sold it to my son-in-law. *Mom and Dad*, the name. A steel hull. That's the 52-footer. He's on his way to Texas. That's strictly night fishing, off of Texas. And you can get within five miles of the beach. But not any closer. At night. Night fishing. That's their season over there while over here it's different. Every state has got their own laws, you see. Like, Biloxi over there. That part of the country. Mississippi. Well, it's going to open later, while our season would open in May. From May first to the tenth or the fifteenth. Over there it's a month and a half later. They leave their shrimp grow. And in Texas, the same way. Before you are allowed catching that you get a much better price for it. If you let them grow, you know. Small shrimp, small profit. Bigger shrimp...course the price this year was way down. Almost half less than last year. So the fishermen didn't get a very good season out of the May season for the brownies. Usually it's some little shrimp, from 80-100. Well, right now the season is closed. They run 36 to 40, 40's, 36 to 40 count. That's what is getting out into the Gulf. But just a few, you know? At the end of the season, they done grew. But there is hardly no more. Then the white shrimping will take over in those bays. And go out for this coming season. August season, for white shrimp.

*So the May season is both for the skimmers and the trawlers?*

Oh yeah. Like this boat can fish out in the Gulf but he can't fish inside. Of course if he could go inside he could shrimp. But he draws a little bit too much water. Lakes are not deep enough so he stays out. Off of Grand Island. Fishes off of Grand Island. Crosses the river, going to Breton Sound and fishes that part of the country. When the Texas season gets closer and closer...there is not much to do right now in our part of the Gulf. So then they run over there. That's what is happening.

Our way of living was strictly as a fisherman, till I retired. I am 71 years old now. And I know that I have gone shrimp for 47 years. And in that part of time, I had one, two, three, four boats. That's my fourth boat right there. I built a smaller boat, you know, a lugger-type boat. And then a little bigger boat which is there. And then another one, a little bit bigger than that, out of wood. And finally, we built this one...15 years ago with steel. So that's how it went with me.

*Would you build them yourself...or?*

No, no. Had them built. This boat here was built in Chauvin. Some people over there build boats and that's where we had it built.

*The wooden ones? Were they built in Lafourche?*

The other ones...yeah. No, this one here was also built in Chauvin. This boat there. And then I had a bigger boat. Yeah, the picture is there. But that one...that one was built right across the bayou. I can't tell you how many years ago that was...but a long time ago. Thirty somewhat years, 30, 40 years. Then it got to be where people, most likely, is going to go into the skimmer boat now. That's what they are going to be having ...skimmers, Lafitte skiffs, they're called. And, most likely, they are going to go build or re-buy from somebody else because it is not as expensive...you talk about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars right here. So they most likely will go to a smaller boat. And they do good. All inshore. They do good. Some of them do real well with that. Practically just as much as the bigger boats. The expense is not there. They burn much less fuel. They got the smaller engine. Now, the smaller engine develops a whole bunch of power, see? So they can pull. They can push those skimmer nets at three knots. So if you want to change area there's a small boat with a lot of power. So they can run from one area to the other area in a few hours.

*I was reading that shrimper men were trying to push for some legislation in Louisiana to prevent all these imports. Is that working?*

Not yet. We have got organizations, you know. We got an organization that people put a penny a pound of their shrimp this year. They started that this year to try to raise money to let government know what we are up against. It is hard to...if it gets worse than what it is then I would say it don't pay to have this two hundred and fifty thousand dollar boat there. We got a free country here. I am supposed to...you are supposed to look after me, I would say. The more I do the more tax you get. If I don't do, you get no tax from me. I mean that's what we have here. We have a free country so I ought to be able to do whatever I want or the other guy... he wants to do something else, well, fine. It is a wonderful way of life, you know?

We got together and we said that we just did not want people that did not know about the business. How it was to make a living shrimp. If you got a problem...well, if you have been a fisherman you would surely know what problem you are up against. It is like a gamble. Fishermen is like a gamble. If nature don't put any...we had two cold front that last into March. In March. And we had one in April. Now, that delays your shrimp about three weeks. Pulls your season back by three weeks. So you got to wait until that larvae comes from offshore. Shrimp lives offshore. Then the larvae comes in with the tide. Comes into your bays and estuary and keeps on growing. And if you have a storm before you grow...like, see this August season? Right here? Well the shrimp is inside. It's closed. You get a storm to hit right along our coastline right here. All that shrimp flushes out. A lot of rain. A lot of bad water come from north. Everybody sprays sugarcane, cotton, whatever you have. And it goes down the river. Your bayous. Flushes your shrimp out. So you are not able to get a good season on account of

this storm that you had. And we went through that...we went through storms like that. It was worse than if you wouldn't get a storm. So...

*That's what you are saying you think is happening over in Texas now? With all the rains...*

Oh yeah. That shrimp is going to have to move off. With that flood in Texas...in the north part of Texas. Where is it that they have those homes ...water up to... San Antonio. Well, that's right up from Brownsville to west line or whatever. That water has to come down and it is bad, maybe not bad, bad water but it is too much water. Freshwater. Shrimp is a little bug that lives in salt water. And it has so much fresh water mixed but not all that much. And it will draw them out before like if you just have what I stated. If you have a storm that comes well...before they grow...they are going to have to be moving out. So it messes up your season. Just like little chicks...you got to let them grow. If you kill them before they are full grown well...in a garden or whatever...you got to wait till it matures. Shrimp is the same thing. You've got to let them grow. Lots of people in Louisiana... we've got the state that don't look at what we ought to do with shrimping. And I was on the task force for three years when Edwards was governor here. I was on the task force to try to let our shrimp grow to a somewhat bigger size, but then you've got some other guys that would say, "Well, if you let them go you are going to go out and you big boats are going to catch them and we are not going to be able to catch them. We would rather catch them small and make just enough to eat, you know." I would say the better way is to let them grow. And then catch them when they are full grown. They are not all going to go out. Some of them is going to stay in. And the little boat is going to get a better price for your merchandise. And we also tried to do sanctuaries. Those shallow bays and bayous where shrimp is going to empty into this bayou. Or the bay is going to empty into the lake. Stop going into those little bays. Let the shrimp alone. They'll grow. And as they come out in the main lake you are going to catch them there. They are going to grow some. We've got people in all those bays up to New Orleans over there. Or in the Intracoastal. That far up country. You would never see that in the old days, you know? People would try to catch better shrimp. Better shrimp. The bays was not fished at all. As they grew...they would generally work theirselves to the south. Cold front. You would wait for a cold front then what's inside...more inside, comes into the main lake and from the main lake goes out into the Gulf. All steps.

*So is the cold front...is that pushing them out because they are looking for warmer water in the open Gulf or...?*

Yeah, I would say. I would say. Shallow, you see? The bays are shallow, they get too cold. They run off. It will push them out where if it gets cold, cold, cold, with ice. Bunch of cold fronts. Real nasty cold fronts. They are going to go out where it will come so you don't even have some along the coastline. They will go further out. In deeper water. Cold front is the thing but if you leave them alone in the shallow bay you will have more shrimp. And you'd catch them at a bigger size. You've got no less than 25 skimmer boats compared to one boat like that, 25 of them, with their voice, you know? They've got more voices... ninety percent of the guys don't want no sanctuaries. They want to trawl, to trawl. And it makes you think that one day they ain't going to have enough shrimp to go around. And if they are going to have the little bit that they have you are going to catch them small. You are not going to make much money. That's what the whole trouble down here is. We catch them too small. I already went to a

meeting in Baton Rouge and the guy would say, "Well, we got to catch them smaller here. We've got a state that don't produce big shrimp." Saying that they don't grow, you know? But they do grow then because we started 80 to 100 and right now this radio over here I can talk to my brother there and ask him, "What size are you catching?" It won't be a 100 count, it will be 36 to 40. Shows that they grew. They grow and they will grow some more. Whatever they are not going to catch along the coast there is going to go out there and they are going to keep on growing. Keep on growing. If you go in deeper water, you'll catch them. Big like that. Fifteen, 20, 12 to the pound. So they do grow. But it's hard to make the little boat understand that and you know you don't want to stretch it out too much. People are not going to like you because I've got the bigger boat. So that's what I see that we needed. And we had a task force to try to manage that but we got outvoted. There was three guys with the bigger boats and all the rest was about thirteen guys on that panel. And then we would get outvoted, you know?

One year we was able to do for white shrimp season with inch and a half size mesh trawl. Bigger mesh trawl. Since we can't close and do sanctuaries, well, let's pull a bigger mesh trawl. A little bigger mesh trawl. And then maybe some little ones are going to get out of that net. But then the next year somewhere down the line, some bigger guy with a bigger voice, got that back to an inch and a quarter and an inch and three-eighths size mesh. An inch and a quarter mesh size trawl is not a big mesh at all. You surely are going to catch the little ones. So they are going to catch the little one. That's how things are going so far. I would tell you that to start again...you are raising a family, like my sons. I've got one son and one son-in-law with his boat here. Have your sons and daughter graduate. If you can afford, send them to college. Don't try to be a shrimp fisherman. That's what I've got to see. No siree. No shrimp fishing, no more. I see that. I see that as a dying business. That's what I see in the tank. A dying business.

*Primarily because of...?*

Whoever has got a job and is disabled...well, can't get a job no more. So he buys a little boat. He buys a little boat and he fishes, like I tell you, in the nest. Where the shrimp grow. That's where he fish. Catches the little ones. He got some of them so small he got them on a trailer. His boat's on a trailer and season's over he goes to park his boat. Park his trawl. When season is back he goes back. He got a benefit check because he is disabled. And it's side money. And he needs that money too now, you know? He needs that money now. It is expensive to live. So he needs all that help to make his life. So it's a situation that you have no control and you see it going on account of that. This is what is going on and it keeps on worse every year. During the season of May when the shrimp is small, the school is out, they will bring their wives, their children on those boats and whatever they catch can come home, you know? So not very much expense. And that's all side money that they are going to have, you see? And they need that, believe you and me, they need all of what they can catch. But we are not watching to preserve nothing, you know? We are at the bottom of the barrel. And we are still going more and more and more. No nothing to replenish...to try to replenish. And there was nothing we can do. I tried all in my expense, me and two other guys, to go to meetings in Baton Rouge. Try to manage the shrimp industry better than what it is. We saw that but we just can't swing it.

*Are the little guys also belonging to the association?*

Some of them. Most likely they are not going to come into the association. They do not want to give that penny a pound. You know? For the little ones is not going to....they might because they are not going to catch as much as that big boat. But still in all they don't know it but they're gonna, might get in trouble. I don't know if they would see that...but I see it. And you are going to talk with them and ask them if they are going to send their children out there in a boat when they're old enough. Like my kids, 10, 12 years old. I can't have that. I know better than they got to go to school. I am going to spend my last dollar to see that they go to school. And raise up a license or take some other trade but not as a fisherman. Can't do it no more. It's just like French speaking that people want to bring back. It's too far gone. Can't bring it back. Our sons and daughter don't speak no French with us—with me and Mom right here. They speak English. It's that way now. My mother and dad wouldn't know how to speak English so we was all a French speaking community. A lot of people go to school and it is a very good thing.

## 7. GETTING THROUGH THE EIGHTIES

The early to mid 1980's were watershed years, for the country, for the industry, and for the people and communities along the Gulf of Mexico. There was a nation-wide recession, fueled in part by the peaking of consumer prices for oil and natural gas through the 1970's. For a time, this was good for producers and refiners. In the wake of expensive gasoline at the pumps, conservation measures kicked in. Demand started to slacken, as did the activities of the oil producers and all their supporting businesses. Boat companies and contract drillers who had invested in pricey new equipment during the flurry of activity in the 1970's saw much-reduced demand for their supply boats and drilling rigs in the early 1980's. Companies went bankrupt and closed their doors. Roughnecks and roustabouts, drawn to the region in the 1970's, left in the 1980's. Some long-term residents of the coastal parishes in Louisiana also moved out, unable to make a living in oil and gas and, for the most part, unable to make ends meet with the remaining natural resources of a quickly-deteriorating marsh.

The region had experienced a full-scale "bust" following the bona fide "boom" of the 1970's. However, people along the Gulf experienced the bust at different times, in different ways. Bayou Lafourche, which had staked its claim to the boat industry, servicing and supplying the offshore rigs and platforms, was hard hit. Investors – the "doctors, lawyers, and teachers" – saw their boats repossessed and their investments vanish. Experienced people who had been in the boat business for two generations felt the bust as well. But some who had shipyards and dry docks prospered a little, doing Coast Guard-mandated repairs on idle vessels or falling back on their perennial business of readying the shrimp fleet for the fishing season. And those who read the future of the industry correctly began to build the facilities that would be needed sooner or later. This was when construction activity at Port Fourchon took off. Others who had entered the industry at the bottom rungs of the ladder in the 1950's, came to retirement age when the downturn of the 1980's hit. They were offered respectable retirement packages and invested wisely. Big companies trying to tighten the belts began buying out the older, experienced and higher-paid workers. Companies began the processes of mergers, acquisitions, divestments, consolidations and downsizing that would continue through the 1990's, leaving just a relative handful of players by the new century. Disillusioned parents, many who had grown up as "Texaco families" or "Chevron families," warned their sons and daughters to avoid the cycles of the oil and gas industry and seek education and work elsewhere.

The industry would rebound and fluctuate in the 1990's. It would move out into deep and then very deep waters. Port Fourchon, at the mouth of Bayou Lafourche, would capture much of the business of servicing and supplying this new segment. Drilling and production companies would partially automate their operations. Live people would still be needed to do the dangerous work, but new skills were needed: computer operators, technicians trained to read and interpret sophisticated new seismics, mariners trained and tested on new navigation aids and more sophisticated and bigger boats.

Nevertheless, laborers continued to be in demand, to do the messy work of cleaning storage tanks and the more exacting work of fabricating the platforms and welding the boats. Companies specialized in recruiting such labor and supplying it on demand to all segments of the oil and gas

industry. By the new millennium, a substantial part of the workforce was “contingent,” hired when needed, idle when the task at hand was finished. The workforce was also increasingly global, with skilled and semi-skilled personnel coming in to fill needs. Local residents have yet to find a handy label for this wave of neo-*Texiens*.

### **7.1. Ronald Callais (June 6, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*Ronald, nephew of Mr. Web Callais is a regular at PJ's in Golden Meadow for early morning coffee. I interviewed him in his office at Allied Shipyard, an office well-stocked with novels (James Lee Burke, among them), walls filled with official certificates marking his service on Lafourche Parish's Police Jury and his membership on the Levee Board. Ronald became president of the Levee Board when Leon Theriot passed away. He offered that he is semi-retired from the shipyard business (started in 1980), though he comes in to the office, often just to read. This yard, and another in Larose run by his son, exclusively do repair work, including much work for the shrimp industry. At one time, Ronald was also involved in the utility boat business of his father, Abdon Callais, but got out of that end of it when it was clear that the two enterprises were in conflict. He was repairing the boats that competed with his own boat rental business. He graduated from high school in 1959, then went to the University of Southwestern Louisiana for accounting, then transferred to Nicholls.*

The first brother was Abdon Callais. He owned Abdon Callais Boat Company. The second brother was Fornest. He and his sons owned Callais and Sons and various other small companies. They were inland towing, small tugs, inside. Then the third brother was Weber. Now Weber had various companies throughout the years, but the major company was Callais and Callais. Then the fourth brother was Joseph. He owned B & C Boat Company, which was Blanchard and Callais. And then the fifth one was Harris. He just died. He was partnered up with Web, he was the second Callais from Callais and Callais. Then the sisters was, Inez was the oldest. Her husband was Frisco, just like San Francisco, Gisclair. He was in the inshore and offshore tug boat business. He owned Guidry and Gisclair and Lafourche Tugs. And the second sister was Pearl. She's married to Luke Bellenger. And he owned Bellenger, he owns the offshore tugs. Then my final aunt is Velma. She is currently divorced, but she was married to a Rogers, Arden Rogers. He was a school teacher and retired as superintendent of the school system. He also at one time was in the boat business, with his brother and his brother-in-law, Luke. So the whole family, everyone was involved in the boat business, all in the same boat business, one way or the other. Now the older brothers all started off as fishermen. That was a family trade. My grandmother owned a little grocery store. But the older sons were all fishermen. We all worked for my grandfather, starting off, you know, working in the boat with him, then when they get old enough, they go on up the water, get their own boats, out on their own. My Uncle Weber, he owned a net shop. He owned several shrimp boats. That's how they got into the offshore oil business, because they owned the little wooden shrimp boats. And gradually the demand for boats became so big that the oil companies couldn't find them. It was a job for little boats in the off season. And then it got to when it was more profitable and more steadier source of income to work for the oil companies than to go fishing, with the ups and downs in the fishing industry. One day you was making money. The next day you wasn't making any money. It was steadier and in a lot of cases it was easier, too, working for oil companies than it was shrimp. Shrimping was pretty tough in those days. It was hard work.

What Daddy would do is he'd shrimp during the winter. And when they'd shut down the shrimping for part of the year he'd go to work for the oil company. A lot of times he'd be pushing a little barge, or he'd be supplying -- it was all inshore stuff. He'd be working in the lakes, bringing crews, bringing supplies to rigs. In fact, one summer I remember, the state hired his boat... the whole wooden bulkhead that's in Bayou Lafourche down here? My father was the boat that pushed the pile driver the drove all those things in. Mom and I'd go bring him dinner every day. It was right in the bayou, so she'd go bring him, pack a lunch for him. We'd go to the boat, I'd stay a little while. I was too young. They didn't trust me on the boat. There's always, you know, the danger of falling overboard. But we always were involved in the marine industry in one way of the other. Either fishing or the boat business.

*But you were involved in the shipyard and the boat business?*

Well, I was in both of 'em at the same time. And it was kinda hard to hustle a man's business and hustle his job at the same time. I'm asking him to come over and do my work and I'm competing with him for his job out there. That didn't work. So I came to the realization that I'd rather be in the shipyard business than the boat business. So I sold my boats. My oldest son was working for me, taking care of the boats for me. My second son was running the shipyards. I just got rid of the boats. My oldest son, he's running the shipyards. My second son runs the Larose operation. He's kinda switched positions.

*Were the brothers competing against each other when they all had their own boat companies?*

Not really. I mean, you weren't trying to hustle each other's jobs. But the jobs were scarce and sometimes, like Uncle Web, Uncle Web was more of a... had no more education than others, he was more of a motivator, he could get work. And he'd call my daddy, say "There's a job coming up, I'm pretty sure there's a payroll that was coming." They'd help each other out. See, like, the tug boat and the offshore supply boat, and the inland tug boat, were really never in competition with each other. Actually, Uncle Fornest and Uncle Luke were partners at one time, brother-in-law and the brother. But then they split up. Each went their own way, diverging interests. One wanted to do one thing, another might want to do something, go another way about it. So they kinda split up, everything was split up, but they going their own way. There was always enough work for everybody. Next time you might be working through them, well, next time he might be working through you, you know. You work together. There was still plenty up there. Now when there's a slowdown, not quite so friendly. Vicious business. 'Course still family, family. But it can be tough, it can be cut-throat. The prices are dropping and the jobs are becoming more and more scarce. Sometimes you had to play hardball to get your job. It's a fact of life. It's like that in any business. As long as you're ethical and you don't do anything wrong. You do what you can to survive.

*When things really slowed down in the 80's, was it really a disaster or did people just kinda...?*

Tom, it just blindsided us. Nobody expected that. Look, I had six boats in those days. I'd just bought this shipyard and I was operating six medium sized offshore boats. I had a company talking to me about building a job, a boat, for a particular job for them. Within three months I

had five of my six boats tied up. [Claps his hands once.] Like that. Nobody expected that! And what we did is we all sat back. We kept crew. We made financial expenditures that looking back on we should have never done. But we thought it was temporary. We kept crews, we kept boats tied up, we didn't scale back down on our style of living. But then after a month, two months, three months, then we realized this was gonna be a long haul. And it was. It was, I guess about a year, year and half it got halfway back to normal. A lot of companies went under. We were fortunate, my brother and I. We had several interests together. We were fortunate we had outside sources of income that could supplement our boats. Because with the boats tied up, we were cash-rich. We had a lot of cash, we had savings, we had CDs. Just paying bills and trying to survive. But we weren't wasting it. After a while we realized it was gonna be a long one. Well, you know, you got to keep your boats in shape. Even though your boat doesn't have a job, when the Coast Guard inspector comes up, you got to go to that Coast Guard inspection. And when you go to the Coast Guard inspection, you don't choose what you're gonna do. They tell you what maintenance you're gonna do. So, you mighta had, say you had 100,000 dollars' worth of seismograph work for that particular boat, you might go to Coast Guard inspection and blow 50,000 of it in a matter of a week. So, you have to keep the equipment available so that when jobs came up, you could go to work. In the oil business, you gotta be there. When opportunity presents itself, you got to take advantage of the opportunity. Well, okay, I'll have my boat ready in two weeks. You don't, somebody else will.

Now, what really hurt us too, really, really devastated a lot of companies, is you had a bunch of doctors, attorneys, people in other forms of business, who invested in these limited partnerships. They put money into it, they mighta put 10 to 50,000 dollars apiece. And they mighta formed a company, 10 of 'em together, they mighta owned 15, 20 boats. They formed these limited partnerships, invested this money, and then, because of limited liability, they lost their money and moved on. Well, these banks who had financed boats had their boats in hand. What they did, in my case, is they took these boats and turned 'em over to other people, who a lot of 'em were, like, were shysters, fly-by-nights. They took these boats, took the money the bank had give 'em to operate them and they'd run 'em to the ground and then take the money and go. So, what'd happen, the bank'd wind up with the boat on their hands again. But what the bank had did, without realizing, they'd think about going back in, to put that boat back into the market, they were hurting their other customers, people like us. These guys were competing against us for the jobs, working for less money. And we mighta had the same financing with the same bank that was doing that. So what they'd do? They were cutting the throat of their other customers, instead of taking those boats and tying 'em up and biting the bullet and taking their loss but at least keep their other customers. They were forcing other people under. So you got a panic situation. I saw boats that we were working at the time, we mighta been working a boat, say for 13, 14 hundred dollars a day, which was a good wage for those boats in those days. I saw myself working the same boat for 650 a day, actually losing money on the job, but because the bank wanted utilization, I'd work the boat. I wasn't losing as much as I'd be losing with the boat tied up. But I wasn't making any money. It was just a no-win situation. But the bank would work with you, but you had to work with the bank, too. You had to show that you were, at least were trying to...

But like I started to say earlier, my brother and I were fortunate in that we had other sources of income we could continue putting money into... we could borrow against other assets or use

cash from somewhere else and keep it going. A lot of people were not in that situation. And they lost it, they lost everything, their whole life savings. It was bleak. We went through three of those things. It's ugly. Now, it takes a while with the shipyard, 'cause what happens is when that boat gets off a job, they do what I would do. They bring their boat in, get their boat in shape. So, we're always a little behind the cycle in the shipyard business. They'd slow down, but we still going strong. Then we catch up... if things haven't picked up, then we slowed down. But we also have the fishing. This yard, it does... well, we do, I'd say, 99 percent of the Vietnamese work is done here. And we do more shrimp boats than all the other yards put together. Whereas my Larose yard is basically more for offshore supply boats, the larger boats, float and dry dock.

*So when were the basic slowdowns?*

The first one that came around was in '60, let's see I graduated high school in '57. '59, they had about a three year... '58 there was a slowdown and then it picked up a little bit. And then in '61, was another slowdown. Then it picked up again, they did real well till the 80's. Then it slowed down in '80. Then, picked up for three, four, five years, then it dropped again, I guess, in the early 90's. And then it picked up since and it's been going well since. The reason I know that, '61, is that I was in college and my wife and I were getting married and I lined up a job for her in the Oil Center. I was going to what was then SLI, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. I was a student over there and I was getting married. I'd lined up a job for my wife in the Oil Center as a secretary. And I'd gotten an apartment and when the time got to get married, hell, not only were the jobs not there, they were laying people off. So I wind up having to transfer schools, I moved back down here and I got my degree. I got married nonetheless. But I got the degree from Nicholls State rather than USL. But that's how the slowdown personally affected me, made me have to change colleges 'cause I wanted to get married.

*What'd you major in?*

Accounting. Started off in engineering. My older brother was an engineer. First year I liked to have flunked out of school. So I chose accounting. It's still math, but it's not the calculus and the trig, analytical geometry. I just don't get it. It doesn't interest me. Bores me, that sort of stuff. I like working with numbers, but them stuff bored me.

*During the slowdowns, you say you guys are a little behind the cycle. How 'bout the other sectors, like fabrication yards and ones that are doing...?*

The fabrication yards are really the most critical, as far as most affected by changes in the industry, because the first thing you'll do, you'll cancel programs to build. I don't see how a fabrication yard can exist as a pure fabrication yard. See this yard here, Allied Shipyards, started off as a fabrication yard. I was the accountant for it. Belonged to my wife's family, her brother, her father, her uncles, cousins, five of 'em got together. And I was the accountant for 'em. And I'm the first one that convinced 'em to build the dry dock 'cause I could see that fabrication, unless you got the repair facility to keep the steady work, the work force steady... You build 'em a boat today, finish that job, and may be another month before you get another contract, what do you do with the employees? Come along, you get another job, where are those employees?

Well, they're working for somebody else. But if you got the repair facility, repair facility is pretty steady anytime. You're never completely shut down. You always have a crew, enough to keep a crew working. So you got a steady source of employees. Your more critical employees, your better employees. Now you can always fill in the roustabout. Your fitters, your fitters are your most important. That's your artisans. Your welders, your roustabouts, your tackers, you can replace those. But a fitter, that's the guy that cuts, that fits, he's the artisan. He's the artisan of the business. So you got to take care of those guys so you got to have some sort of work going on to make sure you provide work for him, you see. Like you see Halter has always been a pure fabrication yard and I mean they've been decimated by these slowdowns. Huge one there, two or three years later halted, everything shut down. Bollinger's been successful. Why? Because they've got the fabrication and they've got the repair. Now we're strictly repair. We tried the fabrication but the personnel we have are repair personnel. I'd rather repair. It's more to my liking what we do. My field of expertise is repair. 'Cause you need the engineers. Nowadays if you gonna go into construction, you need everything they got, the structural engineers, you need the nautical engineers, you know. You gotta have a big staff. I don't care for that. I'd rather stay in the repair business.

*Your uncle was complaining about Coast Guard inspections and repairs. Is that a steady business for people like you?*

Keeps us alive. I love the Coast Guard. No, you see, my late father and all of my uncles could not have survived in today's environment. Because Coast Guard inspection in the 60's and the 70's, you were ready for Coast Guard inspection, you called the office, the guy'd come down, drive up. And you'd done all your work. He'd drive up, he'd go up there, go down to the kitchen and have a cup of coffee. He'd pull out his books. "You did this?" "Sure, we did that." "Did this?" With his cup of coffee, give you the certificate, he'd leave. Now, you pull the boat up and you scrape the bottom, and you wait for the Coast Guard inspector to come. Don't you dare start doing anything till he gets there. Then he gets there, he gives you a scope for work for you to do. Then he comes periodically and he checks to make sure that it's being done. He pressure checks everything. It's a tougher business, that's why it is today. The business they were in was all coastal stuff, it really wasn't the exposure to the elements you have now. And you didn't have the stresses on the boats you have now. They weren't bringing the big heavy loads like they do now. You don't have the same number of people. So, the risk was small, there was a more relaxed business. Coast Guard wasn't as intense as they are now.

So, my late father, you know, I worked as a boat captain for him. And later I ran the business. Well he still owned it. And then I bought him out later. But I could see how frustrated he'd get with Coast Guard. This yard was a much smaller yard, called Cajun Shipyard. We pulled up a little 65 foot supply boat named the *Charles*, my daddy's first supply boat, a steel boat. And we get up there, and I got here a little late for some reason or another, and the Coast Guard had come already. And daddy was sitting on the back end of the boat and I could see he was frustrated. Said, "What's wrong, Pop?" "You know what that stupid son of a gun asked me to do? He asked me to turn the steering wheel. He want to see if the rudders were gonna turn." He say, "How stupid can that be! Of course, the rudders are gonna turn!" But the guy want to see if there was any slack in there, was there any in there. Daddy never looked at it that way.

That's when I realized... I said, "Pop, don't worry about it. I'll take over." But he was besides himself. The mere fact that the guy was stupid enough to think that he'd put a boat in the water without a rudder. And a steering wheel that wouldn't work. But he never looked... He never saw the big picture. He was used to operating in a particular way. Well, you know. Of course there was a lot more trust, too. Most people of that generation, they told you something and you shook hands or something, you didn't have to have any papers signed. You shook hands, you had the deal and the deal was the deal. A man asked you a question, you answered him, you could bank on it. My daddy said "Look, that steering works." It works. That's why a lot of times, these Coast Guardsmen would come down, and, a lot of times, they'd asked you something, you know, you gave 'em the answer, they could rely on it. Most of the stuff they'd asked you to do, it had been done. You might not agree with their order but it was done.

Let me tell you a story about my late father. My late father was operating four boats. And one particular boat, it was an old shrimp boat he'd converted into a little offshore supply boat, utility vessel. And the minute things would slow down, his boat was let go. Now, there was a little boat there that was half the boat my daddy's boat was. And, they'd let him go and they'd keep the other boat. But the other guy was better connected in the company than my father was, that's all it was. But it used to frustrate my daddy. "I'm being let go, and this son of a gun doesn't have the boat I've got. He keeps his job." So finally he got mad one day and he said "I'm selling the boat." So he made a deal with a guy to sell the boat. Then he comes up to me and he tells me, "Look, son, I'm selling the boat." I said, "Pop, what you got? You're giving the boat." I think the figure he sold the boat was like 60,000 dollars. He coulda got 80, 90,000 dollars for the boat easily. I said, "Pop, you're giving the boat. You can't." "Wrong. Let's get something straight. I gave that man my word. I realize now I'm losing money. I give the man the word. I'm selling that boat." Hadn't nothing been signed, strictly a handshake and agreement. And he sold the boat for what he agreed to sell the boat for. Can you imagine that happening today? Very few people will go through with a deal like that. Even when you got it signed, they wanna try to change the deal on you. But, that's an aside. You know, fewer operators, smaller operators, although we going back to the cycle of fewer operators now. But they's larger operators. A lot of the smaller companies have been just absorbed. The big ones are just eating 'em alive.

*Are the big ones doing the same kind of under-pricing their stuff to get other people out of business?*

Right now, no, they're not. But the oil companies are dictating the prices right now. And prices for boats have nothing to do with price of oil. Just like the price of gasoline has nothing to do with the price of oil. Well, the price you get for your boat has nothing to do with the price of oil. It's just the market has shrunk and the players have shrunk. So, where you mighta had, say 20 years ago, you mighta had 30 or 40 oil companies drilling offshore. What you got what, five, now? And you can't make me believe that those guys don't talk to each other. I mean, you know, Shell talks to Chevron, Chevron talks to MobilExxon, they talk to BP. These guys, they know what they're paying for boats, and they know what they can get away with paying for boats. Nothing to prove, but I know they do. You can't blame 'em. They gotta get their maximum for their dollar.

*We talked to people over in Morgan City a few years ago and one guy said you know, when you start seeing the day rates going down, he said it was the oil companies' turn at bat. And it's the boat companies that had their turn. Is that the kind of cycle...?*

Yeah, yeah. Whoever got the big stick. Boats that I would'a been ecstatic to work for 12, 13 hundred were earning 3,000 dollars. 'Course the cost of operation is going up. But the cost of operation is not going up that much. You take a little supply boat and you're making 3,000 dollars a day. That's already 100,000 a month. The boat mighta cost you, when you built it, mighta cost you 300,000. Three months you gross the value...the cost of your boat, you know. So let's see, you got 50 percent, you still making 15 hundred a day. Multiply that by 365 days, what kinda money you talking about? So in the short span, for a few years, the boats made some money. I know boats that were working for 10,000 a day, 12,000 a day. Those larger specialty boats.

*What would turn the cycle back around in favor of the boat companies?*

Scarcity. Scarcity. What happens, see, you go to Bollinger's in Larose... all those boats that's tied up. Ninety percent of that will never go back to work. That's been cannibalized. Either they come from the foreign market but they can't come back and be flagged as an American boat, in the American market again. Or they been brought there and the engines have been stolen off, or taken off, and are being used somewhere else. Or the electronics is gone. And by being tied up there, the stuff just deteriorates where it's really cheaper to go build a boat than put some of 'em back in service. The ones that are there are junk. There's a handful of 'em 'cause I know some of my customers would tie up there. People are starting to use their heads a little bit more. Instead of having 10 boats compete for eight jobs, they started realizing, "Well, let's tie up two of 'em. And with eight jobs we got eight boats. We can hold the rate up." They start to do it. And by having less oil companies out there, less operators, it's a tighter market. You can do the same thing between Tidewater, ENSCO and the other companies, they can dictate a little bit, in other words, by pulling their boats outta the markets. Instead of having 10 boats and not making any money, let's have four boats making a few dollars. You can afford to tie up.

*So, just as you say the oil companies are talking to each other....*

You know, the boat companies, they'll be talking to each others. At one time, they were at their mercy. I was a small little four-boat operator, six-boat operator and my partner had four boats. The other guy had three boats. I had loads, I had to work that son of a gun, you know. But now, all 12 boats and one operator now. So he's sitting back, he's big enough with economy of scale that he can afford to cut back and tie up a few. Whereas I couldn't afford, I had to have more work. Or at least I thought I had to have more work. So, as the number of companies, not necessarily the number of boats, but the number of operators, the number of companies decreases, you have more control of the market. But it'd never get to the point where the boats were gonna dictate on a consistent basis. You know, the big boys, the oil companies always gonna have the upper hand. But by getting' together, you can... And people complain about the unions. I'm not a big proponent of the unions. I think, personally, I think unions were probably the best thing to ever happen to the working class in this country, 30, 40, 50 years ago. Right now it's one of the worst things we got. But, I've always said this. In the slowdown in 1980,

had we been unionized, the oil companies could not have done to us what they did to us. They'da had to be dealing with unions. They'da had to, you know, be a little bit more delicate. Because if we'da had unionized people on our boats, they've got unionized people in their refineries that could have affected what they did to the boat people. See what I'm getting' at? They coulda just said, "Well, they let my boat go. So what? I have no union people on my boat." But if I've got union people on my boat, they let my boat go, class action suit or whatever, we go get us a work stoppage or whatever it is. The other unions would support it, you know. So even though I'm not for unions, I think in that particular instance, I think it'da lessened the impact.

I'm as anti-union as they come. I do not care, I do not care for unions in my business over there. 'Cause I pay top dollar, I take care of my people, you know. But I don't want somebody coming in telling me what I gotta do and what I don't have to do. I know, I've talked to some of my customers that have gone union yards, and the job that I'm gonna do for a customer, say 10,000 dollars over here, the union yard is gonna cost you 50,000 dollars. It's unbelievable. Because you get a guy come here, you got a welder, he goes there, there's a wire there. My welder's gonna go there, he's gonna cut it. At a union yard, an electrician comes, he moves the wire, then the welder-cutter comes, he cuts, the welder comes and he welds and then the electrician comes back. So you got four men doing the same job that one man does. The same amount of time, but you're being charged for four people instead of one. So, that's, that's what's bad about the union yards. They kill the goose that laid the golden egg. They go too far. You know, you gotta protect workers' interests, I understand, you gotta pay 'em a decent wage. But when you get all this overhead, the burden that really shouldn't be there, it's gonna make you non-competitive... In the shipyard business, I'm a small operator. They don't mess with me. They'll go to McDermott, they'll go to Bollinger. Now, once these guys fall in lines, I'm just gonna lean over and fall with 'em, is what I'm gonna have to do. I have no choice, because I won't be able to get any employees because of the scale of wages.

*How 'bout at Chouest? I mean, they were kinda targeted.*

They were targeting Chouest. Chouest worked it smart, they were smart. They got their employees involved. The CCFC (Concerned Citizens for the Community). Chouest is a very successful operator. But Chouest is tough. Chouest wants to do everything themselves. And, you know, there's certain things you can do yourself and you can do well. There's certain things you can do yourself you can do almost well. Other people can do better for you. But, you know, everybody's gotta make a living. When you get to the point where you start taking this... well, right now they're talking about opening a grocery store to handle their own groceries. You know, not to criticize... Why do that? You got a grocery store. Everybody gotta make a living. Don't go cut out that guy, you know. I just don't care for that sort of thing. You make enemies. You need public support. Right now, Chouest has got my public support, because of the way they handled... they used their employees to counteract the union workers. They're smart in doing that. But if you do that, then you start doing other stuff. You start losing your public support, once you lose your public support, these guys'll come in and they'll kill ya. So it's not only a monetary deal, it's a matter of perception, public perception. How they look at your company, how they feel about your companies. When you got a lot of employees that are resentful of the owner. Not an overwhelming majority, you got a lot of 'em. And looking at it

from his point I can sympathize. I don't agree with him, but I can sympathize. Poor son of gun that's in that tank all day long. And he's sweating. In summertime. I can't imagine myself doing what those poor guys do in those tanks. But they are well compensated. But they're looking at the end of the day. Man, he's beat, he's sapped, and he sees me drive by in an air conditioned car. We're human beings. Him in his tank and this son of gun, air conditioned. He just got out of an air conditioned office, air conditioned car, to go to an air conditioned home. "I'm busting and I'm making money for him." It's human nature. Even though a guy may be just, he don't realize what I had to invest, the risk I'm taking to provide him his job. You know, they don't look at that. They're strictly looking at, "Why's he making more money than me?" 'Cause, it's human nature. But you got that working against you. It's hard to get 100 percent support of your employees. But in a case like the union did, you got to have a damn good percentage of 'em to be able to fight. But these are the type of guys that'll go join the union. Even though they don't realize what they're giving up by joining the union. What they don't realize is they're giving up the freedom to go from job to job the way most of our people got here. Our people out here are very independent. Most of my employees are contract workers. They work for me today, they work for the other guy tomorrow. Unionize that, it won't be no more. They could get assigned a job, they come to roll call in the morning and be told where to go. That's union, that's how the unions work. And you can't walk off a job. You got to have a reason. They lose that freedom. That's worth something, you know.

*You were saying you were doing contract welding. That always been the pattern for a yard like this?*

No, at one time most yards were employee operations. But most of the yards were small. When this yard here opened up, it was two little dry docks. Four people owned it. All four worked here. You mighta had three employees besides that. So, it was a small operation. And every little down time they could carry two or three guys. But when you got 100 employees out there, and there's you, you can't afford to carry 99 people. So what we're doing is, we bring in contract workers, we pay a bit better. They have to provide their own insurance. We don't have to carry the burden of insurance. Plus I need you today, you're working. I don't need you tomorrow, I don't have to carry you. And it's understood. I've got maybe, over here, let's say I got 80 employees over here. I've got 20 of 'em [as] full time employees. My foremen, naturally all my office personnel. But my foremen are all full time employees. They earn a little bit less per hour than your contractors. But they provide hospitalization, profit sharing, the amenities. They're guaranteed 45 hours a week. They know they've got their two weeks' vacation, after so many years. An additional week after that. They've got their own perks that come from full time employment. And they're not the ones in those tanks. They'll tell that guy to go to that tank. So, that's worth something there, you know...

*You having any trouble getting workers when you gear up for...?*

We might be short one or two, but generally we pretty much get our workers. A lot of these trucks, notice they're older trucks, real value of the truck is probably the welding machine more than the truck itself. So if he can drive two miles to work, rather than 30 miles round trip, he's not beating up his truck. Then they get stuck on the side of the road, with an old beat up truck that breaks down on him. So you'd rather work close to home. However, if I've got no work,

he's gonna travel to Houma or Morgan City or Leeville or wherever. So, they're available, it might take you a day or two to get to a lot of 'em. Plus, you got a lot of labor contractors down here. Say I call United, I say, "I need 10 men today." "Look, I can get you seven this morning, by this afternoon I can get you another two more, tomorrow I can get your 10." Well, okay. We'll work around that sort of stuff. What I do is, I use them to fill in what I need. I'd rather have my own employees. But, again, on the other side is, if I'm working with a contractor, I have less problems. And if I don't like that man, the man's not working out, you know, he's not doing his job, 'course, I replace him. But if that guy's working directly for me, it's a little harder to do because if I let him go, I have to go and find someone to replace him. Whereas it's not just a matter of picking up the phone and calling the contractor. 'Course I can't call the contractor, call and say, "Send me an extra one," if I let one of my men go. It's a different setup. It's easier to call that contractor. And I'd say, I'd say maybe 30, 40 percent of our employees are contracted.

*We heard the story of some of the bigger yards having to bring in crews from, say Texas, or bring welders up from Mexico. Is that...?*

We've done that a few times. In fact, the day of 9/11, I had a crew of Indians working for me. I had a phone call that night, a customer of mine tell me, "Ronald, do you realize you have a bunch of Arabs working for you? They just hit our World Trade Center. Shouldn't the sheriff's department be called to check up on these people?" "First of all, these guys are from India. They're Hindus. They can't stand the Muslims. You think they'd be in collusion with a bunch of Arab terrorists?" The Indians! This guy never realized it, you know. But we've had 'em, we've had some from Dominican Republic, and we had some Haitians come down, we've had Mexicans come down. Not on a regular basis, but we've used 'em. I would rather use Americans, if I can. Although you can't knock these guys. These are workers. The ones that come over, these are good hard workers. The problem is the communications barrier. The language barrier. It's hard to make the guy understand what you want done if he's doing it wrong. But once they learn, they're good workers. Charge you, but good work. You can't complain. You gotta think of where these guys are coming from. They know this is their opportunity to make a few bucks, to go back home, feed their family, maybe live a little bit better. You know, they're not as spoiled as we Americans are. We figure our money's always gonna be there. These guys gotta make it when they gotta make it. So, they're good workers. I had no problems with 'em. The only thing is the language barrier, communication. A lot of cases where you've got to send a guy with you that speaks English, that he can communicate. But then a lot of time he spends his time communicating and you're paying a guy just to talk. He's not working. So you got an extra man you carry. So, it has its pros and cons. But I have no problem with using 'em if I have to. I have no qualms whatsoever. As long as they work, doesn't matter where they come from. My preference would be local, preferably Americans second, then plain workers. And they do work. I have no problem with that.

*The shrimp boat repair, is that kind of constant?*

Oh, yeah. You have your big influx between the Louisiana season, the Mississippi season, and Texas. They're at different times. And you get an influx right before to be ready to go for it, between those two. But generally, we have shrimp boats throughout the year. We have a

reputation with the shrimpers. They have confidence in us. They like the work that we do. I'd say over here, I'd say, 50 percent of my business is shrimp boats. Maybe more. I never sat down with the figures, but I'd say at least 50 percent. And it's good, it's good work. 'Cause shrimper is a different animal from an oil field man. A shrimper doesn't feel he owes you anything until he's got the money to pay you. It's a mindset. If I don't have the money to pay you, I don't owe you anything. Now, when I make money, I pay you. Don't bother me if I'm not making money. But that's the way they live. They make money, wanna buy a car. Most of 'em would buy it, most 'em buy their cars cash. When they have the money to buy a car, they buy a car. When they have the money to pay you, they pay you. But if you come here and you do a 20,000 dollar job, it takes you a year to collect. You're gonna collect it. I'll charge a certain finance charge, charge you interest on it. Some customers pay it, some of 'em don't. Some of 'em do enough business with you, you kinda... you forgive 'em the interest, you know. It's not fair, but it's part of doing business. You gotta give 'em something somewhere. But nobody gets a free ride. No such thing as a free lunch.

*Did your family own oil property? You said you had some down across from...*

Yeah, we owned property that over years has been in production. Most of the stuff is played out. But currently I have no royalties whatsoever. Most of 'em have played out. There's very little inland activity going on, it's mostly offshore stuff. Over the years, we did have property, we did have royalties. That particular piece in Leeville comes from my father's side of the family. And that has roughly 600 heirs involved. My great-grandmother was married, had three daughters, her husband died. She married this man who was widowed who had four or five kids from with his first wife. Then in the second marriage they had three sons. So there's like maybe 11 or 12 siblings involved. And the way it worked, the old lady, it was her property originally, the old man conned her into selling him the property and it became community property. So his children from the previous marriage came into half of the property, from his estate. It's all people who live on the West Bank, Westwego. A lot of people from here wound up there. Most of the population from the West Bank and Jefferson Parish can trace their roots back to this area. So many hurricanes over the years...eventually some of 'em just gave up and moved to what they thought was safer ground in the New Orleans area. A lot of those people, the old residents of the West Bank, not the new, the old residents, or most of 'em, are people from down here. That's why so many similar names. It's all people from down here.

*So this fellow, Louis Roussel [pointing to book on Ronald's desk], is he typical, making a lot on holding property, on oil money, or is it more your case where it's diffused in the descendants?*

Well, he was the actual operator. He was the one drilling and buying the leases. 'Cause he was the one making money offa us. You knew of Louis Roussel before? He was a character. He owned the fair grounds, the racetrack in New Orleans. He was in partnership with the Italian family that owns the Ronson cigarette lighters, big, big industrial company. He owned all kinds of orange groves along the Mississippi River in Plaquemines. He owned I don't know how much in downtown New Orleans. He was very wealthy, but a wheeler and dealer. He always got a deal. He bought the old St. Charles Hotel, which was a landmark in New Orleans. And they were gonna go ahead and put up this big, big building, this big deal. They tore down that old place. It was a landmark, the old St. Charles Hotel. And I think it's a parking lot, that they

never done it. The deal fell through. In fact, I heard him one time, it was one of his regrets in his life was tearing down that building. ‘Cause he had such a good deal going on. If he’d known it’d fell, he’d never torn it down. He’s a character. I got to talk to him a few times. He was something else. As most of those guys were. They had to be, to do what they did, you know. Wheeling and dealing. Average Joe Blow like you and I, we don’t have the guts to do what these guys did. Things didn’t bother them, you know. If the nickel that they find is a thousand dollars tomorrow, hey, so much the better. The next day they might have a nickel. So the deal falls through, but eventually they hit on enough good deals that they made out good. I couldn’t live like that myself. I doubt that you could do it. Average man can’t do it. Average man wants to know what’s coming down the line, you know. These guys, that’s why they’re there. Hit on one good deal. Might have nine bad deals. That’s what it takes.

## **7.2. Ted Falgout (March 14, 2002; Galliano, LA)**

*Ted Falgout is director of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission. After graduating in fisheries biology from what was then the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Ted got a job with LSU as the first Marine Advisory Agent in the state. This was a new program being tested by the Sea Grant Program in conjunction with the Cooperative Extension Service. Working with fisheries in Lafourche, Terrebonne, and St. Mary’s Parishes, he got to know the port commissioners for Port Fourchon, who convinced him to serve as the port’s executive director. He has presided over the expansion of the port into a primary staging area for deepwater oil and gas operations. He and his brother, Errol, run an alligator farm above the Intracoastal Waterway in Larose.*

My name is Ted Falgout, Port Director of Port Fourchon, Louisiana, a port that has experienced phenomenal growth in the last 10 or so years especially, but it’s a relatively new port in that it was established in 1960 by act of the Legislature. The Commission was established, I should say, in 1960, as a Port Commission and it targeted the development of Port Fourchon, which at that particular time had no infrastructure existing other than just the channels, Belle Pass and Pass Fourchon, that went out into the Gulf, which made a fork and that’s what Fourchon means, “the fork.” And those two channels connecting to Bayou Lafourche were some natural waterways that, historically the fishing industry, minimum recreational usage at that time, pretty dangerous channel, very few navigational aides, a depth of about 12 foot on a good day, is what existed back in the ‘60’s. And our senator at that time, whose name was A.O. Rappelet, had this vision of developing a port at this site. And pretty much what existed was muskrats and mosquitoes at that time and nothing else.

But his vision was to... realizing the proximity of this port to the Gulf of Mexico and that as big as Louisiana is and as much coastal area as it has, it is very limited in its access to the Gulf of Mexico. There are only basically two corridors in all of Louisiana that you can drive to the Gulf of Mexico, and one of ‘em is the Lafourche corridor, which this one provides access to Port Fourchon and Grand Isle, and the other corridor is in extreme southwestern Louisiana, Holly Beach. Those are the only two places where you can access the Gulf of Mexico, and Port Fourchon has this huge geographic advantage in that it’s on the peninsula sticking out into the Gulf of Mexico and it is the southernmost port in the state. Actually, Cameron, Louisiana is on the Gulf of Mexico as well as Port Fourchon, but Port Fourchon sticks 56 miles further out into the Gulf of Mexico than Cameron does, because of its peninsula-type delta that was created by

the Mississippi River about 7000 years ago. But, back to Senator Rappelet and his vision. He envisioned a port that would accommodate the fishing industry of course. Oil and gas was starting to develop at that time. Some of the first offshore wells were off of this area, and because of its proximity, he envisioned the capability to take the banana trade from New Orleans, which was struggling at that time, and bring it to a port closer to the Gulf of Mexico and thus create a more efficient route for moving bananas. Unfortunately, it took a little longer than he had anticipated to get the infrastructure in, to create this port and make it a viable alternative to the port of New Orleans for bananas and fruits and vegetables, and in the interim, the trade went to Gulfport and New Orleans lost it anyway, but it sits today in Gulfport. So Fourchon's opportunity there was short-lived and it didn't make that loop.

But that may have been a blessing in disguise. The port developed over time. Through the '60's just some basic infrastructure was put in place, with some aggregate roads, some levees for hurricane protection, pretty much encircling what Senator Rappelet envisioned as the port, which is pretty much about a 3000-acre area down at the mouth of Bayou Lafourche. And then in the early '70's, the water lines were put in, a couple of docks for docking vessels were put in, a shrimpers' marina as well as an oil and gas slip, well two slips for oil and gas were put in. But no commercial facilities existed there until pretty much the mid '70's, wherein then there were two companies operating out of the port. When I came to work for the port in 1978, we had, again, aggregate roads, only two facilities operating there. We had two more facilities being planned and in construction at that time, [one of which] was Martin Fuel Terminal, one of the first fuel docks. And then there was what we call the banana dock, the dock that Senator Rappelet built to accommodate the banana trade, [it] was being occupied by Shell Oil Company and Dow Well, an oil field fluids company. Those were the only businesses there, and in this relatively short time span from '78 to today, we've grown from two to well over 130 companies operating out of the port and that growth is phenomenal. The port has experienced relatively steady growth but nothing like the last, well since '95 when the people and technological advances allowed for drilling in deeper waters and producing the energy, did the port really take off, because its true advantages in proximity really came out then.

But, back to the evolution of the port. In the late '70's, in '79 and in 1980, we did some major improvements to the channel, to the jetty system, making the channel a lot safer, dredging it down to 20 foot, which was a huge undertaking for a small commission like ours. We sold bonds to help finance that and we got some state money to help, to go into that effort. And that, I guess, put us on the map as being a solid organization and not fly-by-night and we were gonna be there. And LOOP, Louisiana Offshore Oil Port, had established Port Fourchon. Well, the offshore site was going to be 18 miles off of Port Fourchon, and in 1981 they became operational. That additionally showed the logistical advantage of the port close to deep water, and now with the channel improvements, made it very attractive. Several oil companies, such as Baroid and others were starting to build facilities, had negotiated leases with the port, and were putting in improvements. But it really wasn't till the oil bust of the mid- to late '80's that the port really got recognized for its logistical advantage. What happened there was oil and gas pre-1980, pretty much had a dock, an offshore loading or a nearshore loading dock at every coastal community along the coast. They had a dock in Grand Isle, one in Fourchon, one in Dulac, one in Morgan City, in Freshwater Bayou, in Intracoastal City and on and on and on. In the bust of mid-'80's forced them to go back and rethink, cutting costs, reducing the number of docks, to do

some strategic planning of where they were going in the future and that everything was pointing to deeper water further offshore, and it forced them to identify one or two places on the entire coast to build their facilities. And more often than not, Fourchon was the site chosen to locate facilities for the future. So, actually, during the bust when bumper stickers were saying "The last person out of Morgan City, turn out the lights," Fourchon was in a building boom. We didn't have the people working offshore coming through the port, but the people in the port were in construction, building facilities as part of this downsizing effort of oil and gas. So, luckily, that kept our people at least working, in construction and building facilities, although they wasn't going offshore. But when, in the late '80's, when things turned around in the early '90's, we were I guess in the right place at the right time and the oil companies had made some of the right decisions, 'cause when the Gulf got active again, here's that Fourchon, no place economically, environmentally, or geographically better to operate out of. And with existing infrastructure, facilities in place, ready to take on the new era of oil and gas and that's just what happened.

We began to grow rapidly and the port, its impact on the region began to grow rapidly because then we were moving people offshore, and the facilities were in place and we were building them as fast as we could and couldn't keep up. And our east slip development was a major part of that move to accommodate the new era of oil and gas. And, the first leg of our east slip development, which is a 400 foot wide, a slip that had over three miles of waterfront when complete. It was first designed at 400 foot wide, the entrance was, and the first leg of the east was at 400 foot. At that time, no other port was building slips 400 foot wide. Everybody was building, had built slips 250 foot wide. And we saw bigger equipment going out into deeper water and planned and built that first leg. We had planned that first leg to last about 10 years in developing and in accommodating new lessees, and that's just about what it did. It lasted about nine years before we had leased it all out.

And then we were getting close to '95 when we'd taken off to the races, you might say. And it became very evident that 400 foot wasn't even wide enough at that time because the new technology and the deeper and larger vessels. I mean, within a three-year period we jumped from offshore supply vessels, the workhorse in the industry was a 180 foot supply vessel and within three years it went to 240 foot supply vessel and now we're at 270-plus foot, getting bigger and bigger all the time. So we went to 500 foot wide in the next, second leg and the third leg of the east slip. We'd anticipated the second leg and the acreage surrounding it. The total east slip development is about 400 acres, and the second leg was about 80 to 100 acres of property surrounding the waterfront. We'd anticipated that and taken this out to about the year 2010. We actually had it leased out, all of it leased out, before we could even complete it in construction, in about '96, which took us to third and final leg, which we had figured we may never build or at least take us out to the year 2030, and we had that area all leased out before we could actually build it. So we found ourselves with a total 400-acre development, leased out, prior to 2000 and we thought it would take an additional 30 years. And it was very difficult for a port such as ours, or anybody in the oil and gas business, to ramp up to accommodate that kinda growth when in 1994 the Corps of Engineers was doing an environmental impact statement for the resumption of dredging of the channel. And the U.S. Mineral Management Service... information they were getting was predicting a steady decline of oil and gas activity in the Gulf of Mexico for the next 30 years. And it's very difficult for a port to take on an aggressive

construction and borrowing, sell bonds and do anything when those projections were what was utilized by the federal agencies and everyone else.

And, lo and behold, between 1994, the Gulf of Mexico went from what was projected as the “dead sea” in news articles to being called “America’s New Frontier,” and all of the sudden the Gulf was full of oil and things were gonna be booming. And that’s why many facilities across the state found themselves just unable to accommodate any growth. Luckily, we, you know, we were able to accommodate a lot of it, but immediately upon seeing our east slip development was filling up as rapidly as it was, we began the permitting process, the painful permitting process I might add, of developing what we call our northern expansion area, because our port is located in wetland. There’s no area that we can expand to that will not involve wetland. So we deal with that. We are very successful in dealing with the agencies and in permitting, but I like to think we’ve been very conscientious about the environmental impact. We have taken on many projects, very unique to ports, doing bayou embankment work and environmentally beneficial projects. We were creating wetlands and beach stabilization projects, using creative uses of spoils before it became cool to do that and before agencies were requiring groups to use the spoils beneficially for the environment. So we have a long track record of doing that. I’d like to think I played some major part of that being that way. [My] training is in marine biology and I feel comfortable in that area and we’ve done a lot of restoration work that has paid off and has made the port a better place. But, as part of our development, we recognize and accept that we have to mitigate any impacts that occur. With our northern expansion, which is ultimately planned to develop 1700 acres of port property in an open shallow water area, we recognize we have to mitigate those impacts, and the port in 1999 purchased almost 3000 acres of open shallow water north of the port. We spent about a million and a half dollars to purchase this shallow open water body area with the intent of performing our mitigation for future port expansion on that site, and that’s exactly what we’re doing. Our phase one of the northern expansion development impacts about 710 acres and we, as mitigation, have to build 710 acres of marsh. We are actively doing that as we speak, so we’re building marsh to add further protection of the port as a mitigative effort for the impact that we have.

So, what’s key about Port Fourchon that I haven’t touched on yet is it has developed into the main focal point, the intermodal facility for support of the overwhelming majority of the people, the oil and gas activity in the Gulf of Mexico. And this is huge, this is extremely significant. Just to give you some, some ideas of the growth we’ve experienced, in the last five years, our cargo tonnage has increased over 300 percent. I don’t think there’s any other port in the world that has experienced this kind of growth and at that magnitude, ‘cause we’re talking about today handling over 25 million tons of domestic cargo intermodally in a year. In addition to that, over 83 million tons of crude oil went through the port by pipeline, with the LOOP pipeline, Chevron, and other pipelines. So it’s a tremendous significance in the nation’s energy sector in that with LOOP, handling over a million barrels of foreign oil a day plus an additional 300 or so thousand barrels of domestic deepwater oil everyday, and all of the other domestic deepwater support activities occurring, all of a sudden you have this one little dot on a map that is servicing or playing a strategic role in somewhere between 16 and 18 percent of our entire nation’s hydrocarbon supply. Port Fourchon has a strategic role we’re playing in that there’s no other place that can claim to be that significant to this country’s energy supply. And that’s quite a feat

for a port that began with muskrats and mosquitoes in 1960 and today is a dominant player in the oil and gas business of this country. So, that's our success story.

*Do you have a typology of ports? I mean, what would you call Fourchon as opposed to Morgan City or New Iberia or Intracoastal?*

All the ports you mentioned certainly play a part in the oil and gas business, and most of the other ports, the Morgan Cities and Iberias and not so much Freshwater [Intracoastal] City but Morgan City and Iberia have now, because of the creation of Port Fourchon and the economic advantage it has because of proximity to the Gulf, the intermodal business, the actual everyday transfer of cargo to support the activities of drilling and production in the Gulf, the large majority of it has moved to Fourchon. And Morgan City, which once handled the overwhelming majority of that kind of business when it was shelf activity back in '60's and early '70's, now handles very little of it. They still handle some of the shelf stuff in close proximity to the Morgan City area, but not near the deepwater stuff that Port Fourchon handles. In fact, there's an eastern Gulf of Mexico sale going on today at MMS in New Orleans and these tracks...the tracks that you heard President Bush... taking some of the area out of and so forth, but they're south of Alabama and, and extreme western Florida and most of 'em are gonna be serviced out of Port Fourchon. That's how far our range is now in the Gulf of Mexico. So, back to the differences or the similarities between Fourchon and the others, is we're not doing the fabrication of the components that are needed for the rigs and the jackets and the things that are necessary to go out. We're doing the transloading of 'em, and every widget, every gadget, everything needed to support offshore activity has to undergo this intermodal transfer, has to go from the onshore mode of transportation, in from the area it comes from, go to offshore mode, to supply vessel or to helicopter and then comes back and reverses that. We move over 165 thousand people a year by helicopter through our port. It's a huge aviation facility as well.

But the Morgan Cities and Iberias now have developed their niche in that they're further inland, more protected from the storms, closer to larger population centers, and they do the fabrication, the building of the production facilities and so forth, which are important as well. But it's a different business than the regular intermodal transfer. We move, we have over 150 large vessels a day move through our channel, doing this intermodal transfer. If we took those vessels and made 'em go up to Morgan City or to New Iberia or 30 and 40 miles inland like those places are, you'd have a huge environmental impact, number one, from the wave wash alone from moving those vessels, a huge waste in energy, in the cost of having those very expensive vessels burning huge amounts of fuel traveling 30 and 40 miles inland on a daily basis as opposed to two miles in Port Fourchon, you know, it just has a huge impact of saving so that's the difference. Now Freshwater City does, again, some of the shelf, intermodal transfer, you have some limited facilities there, but truly the deepwater stuff... at the last counting that I did looked like Fourchon was doing somewhere around between 80 and 85 percent of all the deepwater work in the Gulf at that particular time, and that was about a year ago last time I really looked at it.

What that means is that, and few people understand the significance of this, is that deepwater has its special needs different from the shelf activity. They use, because of the depth and the type of drilling and the environment they're in, they use huge quantities of pretty much the same things that were used on the shelf and so forth, but they require huge quantities and that's why the boats

have gotten so big, to be able to carry these huge quantities further and further offshore. What also has to happen landside is, in order to provide these huge quantities, you have to develop facilities that have that capability. Otherwise, if you drove into a Morgan City or a New Iberia and wanted to get the quantities of materials needed to support a deepwater vessel, if in fact you could bring that vessel there, it would take days to load that vessel because the technology, they have not put in, it's very costly to build the facilities to provide the quantities necessary for deepwater. So the companies have focused on just one site to spend the tens and, and sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars necessary to gear up to furnish these deepwater projects. They can't justify putting four or five facilities like this across the coast. They can't justify two, so most of 'em are in Fourchon and few people realize that if we lose Fourchon, lose the road system or have a storm and we have a problem here, all the sudden you're gonna have a tremendous inefficiency in servicing the oil and gas industry.

You will be able to send a boat to Morgan City or to Freshwater City but they won't have the facilities to provide the quantity of material that will support this thing, and you're gonna slow down the oil patch, and you're gonna see the price of gasoline go up, and you're gonna see all kinds of things happen. And few people understand that, but that's part of the story we've been trying to tell the U.S. Minerals Management Service, and they understand but they just haven't been able to convey that message to Congress to mitigate the impact that this activity is causing, in mainly LA-1, mainly the highway infrastructure system to this extremely strategic port is, you know, about equivalent to a sidewalk, and it's through this, the most rapidly eroding estuarine system in the world, okay? The Barataria and Terrebonne estuaries are the most rapidly eroding systems in the world because of this delta that's washing away into the sea and subsiding. And this is our only road to get there and few people recognize the threat and the impact it would have if we lose this road. And we will lose it in a hurricane unless a new elevated system is put into place. The federal government is generating somewhere around four billion dollars a year in revenues, in royalties from offshore Louisiana and putting very little, almost nothing, back into supporting this business that's generating them that revenue, and that's no energy policy in my book. And I'm getting too far into that end, but...

*Is that moving forward? I know you've been working on that and a lot of other people are working on that, senators and what not.*

Much of my energy and the LA-1 Coalition's energy, which is a coalition that we formed and I serve as chair of, to create that understanding of the significance of this area, and hopefully improve the highway system, is gaining ground. You know, five years ago, we weren't even on the map. Just last month we got established, when I say "we" I mean LA-1 highway, got established as only the forty-third high priority corridor in this country. We got designated as a high priority corridor and there are only 43 of 'em. So people are recognizing the significance. Since 9/11, energy security as well as port security is a key issue. Just today I'm dealing with the Coast Guard and they're trying to understand how we might secure this country's energy. And this is a key area in doing that. But we are making headway, we're completing the environmental impact statement on this new proposed highway. We have funding to do much of the preliminary work necessary. We need 500 or so million now to do the construction.

*Let's go back a little bit to the act establishing the Port Commission. You talked before about how your Commission is different from a lot of the others and that yours is elected, some of the others are appointed locally at the state level.*

Right. It's unique and colorful in that it involves Louisiana politics at its best. Initially, there were about 26 Port Commissions established by legislative act in this state, and they all were created pretty much the same, with an appointed Board, some of 'em appointed, some by the Governor, some by the Chambers of Commerce and the municipalities and so on and so on. And this one wasn't any different when it was established in 1960. And then the gentleman I mentioned, Senator Rappelet, who has the vision, he had the legislative power and power in Baton Rouge and was in tight with the Governor and had the Governor appoint him as the President. Well, as the main person in the port, he was elected the President by the Commission, by the appointed Commission, and we had picked and got the Governor to put him, and so he was running this port. In those days, things operated a little differently and the laws were maybe not quite the same, but, he was not only the President of the port, but the port was utilizing his construction company to build the port. And this was I assume very lucrative to him, and when he saw his Governor getting ready to go out of power, he felt that he could, I guess, get some assurance of security by passing a law and making the Port Commission elected by the local people where he could continue to serve in his position and be elected by the people, and then the Governor who he wasn't sure was gonna get elected couldn't pull him out and he would lose his position. So he passed legislation making, in 1970... there would be an elected board. And in 1969 he put together a ticket of hand-chosen people to run and it was called the Tarpon ticket. But instead of getting elected he got indicted for working his company at the port and so forth, and he never got elected.

*I noticed in one of your newsletters you're contemplating erecting a statue to the Senator, so he's still held in some esteem...*

Well, yes. I mean, what's the saying, absence makes the heart grow fonder or whatever. I mean, he's deceased now and you can't take away his vision from him, you know. He envisioned this port, the potential of this port, passed the legislation to create it, and he had some visions of potential for shipping and foreign trade, and those are starting to again surface. So you can't take those things away no matter what his other motives were. And, there's an effort to erect a statue of Senator Rappelet in front of our operations center at the port, and we've had a number of people donate money to help that effort, and I'm sure it'll happen one day soon.

### **7.3. Butch Renois and Emmett H. D. Renois Jr. (July 17, 2001; Galliano, LA)**

*These are two sons of Emmett Renois, Sr., from the Shreveport area. The father, born in 1904, died in 2000. His daughter-in-law, Joycelyn, wife of Butch and secretary to Windell Curole at the Lafourche Levee District, shot a home video of Emmett, Sr., in 1992, covering some of his recollections of working in the Leeville oil fields right after the Depression. Butch retired from Chevron, where he was first a production operator, then with the merger of Chevron and Gulf, was transferred onshore to run the supply operation out of Leeville. Emmett, Jr., retired from Conoco, where he was a driller, on Conoco's own rigs and on Rowan rigs. Both are avid hunters, but not down in the bayous. They go up to the old family place of origin. Emmett,*

*though retired, fills in on the Edison Chouest “drug runs.” The company purchases prescription drugs and painkillers from a local drugstore and delivers them to employees at their several facilities. Martial Babin, who started drilling work in Bay Marchand, off the beach at Port Fourchon in 1946, was Butch’s boss. The Renois brothers witnessed an industry in transition, through the downturn of the 1980’s, restructuring, increased regulatory efforts by the Minerals Management Service, and, notably in Conoco’s case, automation of the offshore operations.*

Emmett: This oil field has come a long way since when I started. I started when I was 16. I was on my summer vacation up in north Louisiana. There was a location right off of our place. I got in on the ground floor there. Back then they built concrete pillars to set the derricks on and I got a job helping them do that. Then, I started putting derricks up and I got a job with them. The crew came in and they jacked the car up and put a little cathead on the back wheel. They would put a rope up there and that would be their winch. They would put the derrick up. When the rig came in, I got a job as a roughneck. That was big money. I was making a dollar something an hour. Later on that year, I worked on another. We didn’t have any cars back then. I got me a job up in the hills and I would have to ride my horse up there. I would make my eight hours and ride back down. It was about five miles. I finally got with another company in east Texas. I quit that job because I had to go back to high school. I waited around town for my paycheck. There were some other people putting up a rig there and they wanted me to go work for them. I said that I was just waiting on my check. He said he would pay me. I worked for them about five days because I had to go back to school. Vacation was over. That was one of my first experiences back then. I rode with a boy one time on a motorcycle instead of riding my horse.

Butch: I have been around the oil field all of my life. The two major resources around here is the oil field and the fishing industry. The oil field at one time was hard to get on for a local boy. The oil companies were afraid that once they gave you the proper training, once the shrimp season would open you would leave the oil field to go shrimping where you would make more money. When I started the oil field on September 18, 1961, I started at two thirty-two an hour. I went from a dollar twenty-five to two thirty-two an hour. That was big money. I started in Leeville at Bay Marchand for a number of years. I was in the production end of it. I worked 7 days on and 7 days off. After about nine months, a guy named Pete Hughes from Waterproof, Louisiana, he called me to the dock and said he had to tell me something. He said he wanted me to start working nights on the structure. I was classified as a roustabout A at the time. I said okay. That basically put me on my own. He told me if I had any problems not to hesitate to let him know. I had no problems. I did that for a number of years.... I worked out there in the field until about 1979. Then, I got promoted to wireline operator. I had to change shifts to get that, which meant more money. As a wireline operator, you bail sand, cut paraffin, pull valves, pull gas lift valves, and so on. In 1981, I got transferred into Leeville in the transportation department. That was like going from daylight to dark. It was a horse of a different color. It was all new. You were supplying everyone out there. The one thing I am proud of is that I worked in the biggest offshore oil field in the world. From March, 1949 to June, 1986, we produced over 500 million barrels of oil. This is a little memento that Chevron gave us [shows his plaque]. I am proud to say that I did my part in that production.

*Did you have to do workover stuff in those fields?*

Butch: Yes, you had to do that from time to time because the well will sand up on you or turn to water—called log up. You can't patch it. The last thing you want to do, and I am not trying to be funny, is put sunlight on tubing because that means you have a rig on the well. You will try everything you can to patch that hole without pulling that tubing out. If you have to pull the tubing, you put a rig on it. I have seen chunks of metal come out of a well bigger than this clicker right here. You sand up. You know what a Christmas tree looks like? Your bottom valve is your master valve and it is the last valve that you want to cut out. Once you cut that valve out there is no way of stopping it. I've seen *Double Echo III* out there. I've seen that well make any kind of sand you want it to make. You could powder it on your arm or you could play baseball with it. I've seen it stack up dry as it could be on a deck this high. It will do that for a half of a day then it will start making oil, the prettiest oil you've seen in your life. It might go like that for two or three days, a week, or a month. When they decide they want to make some sand, they make it. I've seen it. You have to watch it because the sand comes quick. A lot of people don't realize it but when you are on a platform in the oil field, you are sitting on a big case of dynamite. You have got a bunch of safety devices and MMS says that you will check them. They will come out there and check them for you. Well, not check them for you but they will come out there and you check them and they will witness. Those things had better work. They have a certain range that have to work in. If they are out of range, you get what is called an “INC”—incident not comply. A company can be fined for that. It will fall back on you because you said yes. You have a form to fill out and your name is on it just like you take your final exam in college.

*The guy who signs and forms, was he liable for it or the company?*

Butch: The guy that signs the form...the company...well, you work for Chevron. But, if you sign that form it is going to come back on you. I mean, hey, your name is on it. I got transferred to Leeville in 1981. We are looking at 20 years and I am sure that things have changed since then. When I was out there, they had what they called a little hydraulic blackhawk pump with a gauge on it. That is what we used to check the controls once a week. If there was something wrong with it, you repaired it. Once you repaired it, you checked it and reset it. Whatever company you worked for, you were responsible for it. Your name is on that form.

*When MMS does their inspections, do they surprise you out there or what?*

Butch: Basically, you know about it. They inform you. Sometimes they are out there every day. They could land on your platform at any time. Nine times out of ten you are informed of when MMS will be there to check. They have the right to land on your platform at any time. Now, that may have changed. No matter if it was your platform or not, if you seen a slick on a water, it was your duty to call it in. You could get fined for not calling it in as well as creating it. They had the proper authorities to call. I am sure that that is still true today. I had a guy call me one time. We used to have a little tank battery near Clovelly on East 36<sup>th</sup> Street. He called me one night because he had a spill. I gave him the information. I asked him an estimated amount of the spill. He said about three barrels. I asked him about how wide it was. He said so many feet. I asked him what color it was. They had a chart out there. I asked him if it was knee deep out

there. He asked me what I meant. I said, "Well with the color, width, and feet that you gave me, it ought to be knee deep." He said no. But, it was only about a half of a gallon that was spilt. One little drop of oil in the water could make a hell of a sheen.

Emmett: I think one drop covers about six hundred square inches.

Butch: I don't know but what they did was went to a pond with a eye dropper. They drop it. Now, remember this is ideal conditions. When you get out there in the open water where the wind is blowing and the seas are choppy, guess what happens. It starts spreading. That is how they measure it. They get the width, length, and color. They have a silver sheen that is barely visible. Now, when it gets dark, you have a lot of fluid on water. A sheen is just like a scum on water. Then, it starts to spread. If you take a little container full of oil and drop it into the Gulf, it will make a hell of a sheen, yet you've only spilled this much.

*Were you ever around any accidents out there?*

Butch: I saw the biggest offshore fire when the Shell platform caught fire out there next to us. I think it was Block 24. When it caught fire, it was the largest offshore fire in the world. It was caused by carelessness by a wireline operator. I mean the platform burnt down to the water level. They brought a bunch of rigs out there. They were in a semi-circle and they drilled some killer wells. They rebuilt that platform again. That was right south of CC structure and kind of west of the *Delta Delta* structure. That was in the '70's. I am not sure what year it was but probably in the mid-'70's. It was in December of that year. Red Adair was called out there and he said there was one thing to do. Drill killer wells.

*That must have been an expensive operation.*

Emmett: Anytime you call him it is expensive.

Butch: Yes, you call Red Adair and you had better get your pocketbook ready. I don't know if he still does that. They got Boots and Coots now. I was told at one time, I don't know what it is today, but if you would pick up your phone and call him it would be 10,000 dollars. Whether that is true or not I have no idea. I never talked to him and I never saw him.

What I used to do in Leeville, in the transportation end of it, you get supplies for the platforms and rigs. At one time we were the purchasing agents for the rigs. The warehouse bought the stuff for the field. In the merger in 1984, when Chevron and Gulf merged, they did away with us being the purchasing agents and put the engineers on the rigs to do their own purchases. My job was to supply them with a vessel. If they needed fuel, water, liquid mud, or whatever they needed to help them with their job. My job was to supply them with a vessel. If I had to hire one, I would. Now, I will tell you something else that I did. My boss told me this one and it made sense. He was talking about a deepwater rig one time. Let's say Chevron got stuck in Green Canyon in 2500 foot of water. Let's say you have a little workover rig here and over here you have a deepwater rig. You have one boat and both of them want that boat. Where are you going to send it to first? Where the most money is at. This guy could fiddle around and do something else. I've always heard them say I'm shut down waiting on you, but I've never seen it

put on a drilling report: 'I'm shut down and waiting on transportation.' They are always shut down waiting on something. Go where your money is at and take care of this guy. Now, if this rig is on fire, stop and help this guy out. Or, if you see potential danger out there, you stop and help this guy. If you stop to help this guy over here, you see, he will probably cost you almost 30,000 dollars a day. Whereas, this guy is probably costing you 8,000 a day. It is common sense.

*Did Chevron use one particular boat company?*

Butch: No. Chevron at one time had their own boats prior to my employment. Chevron got out of the boat business and the drilling business. Chevron used to have their own drilling rigs. Two that I remember offhand were S55 and S56. They got out of all that.

*Was that in the '80's?*

Butch: They got out of the drilling before that. They had some when I went to work in '61. It was probably in the late '60, early '70's that they got out of the drilling rig and boat business. They sold their vessels and all of their rigs. Chevron figured it was cheaper to lease or rent one. When you are finish with it, you would release it. All we had to do was supply fuel, engine oil, and hydraulic oil. The rope, paint and all was for them. We supplied them with diesel and lubricants.

*They would crew up themselves?*

Butch: Yes, it was their responsibility to put their crews and groceries on there. We hired a vessel. We told them what the job was, the requirements, how long the job would take, and it was up to that company to supply the vessel with the proper things. Sometimes we would hire a jackup barge and it would just depend on what the job was if we would supply the groceries. Ninety-nine percent of the time it was catered anyway. Don't get me wrong, we paid for the groceries. Chevron ended up paying for everything. It was that catering company's responsibility to get the groceries to the dock, my responsibility to get it on the boat and get it out. Very seldom we bought groceries.

*Where was your shore facility before Fourchon got going?*

Butch: Well, our shore facility was in Leeville, right there below the bridge there. Have you been to Leeville? Did you see the Chevron heliport? That is where it starts. We were right there below the Chevron heliport in that Chevron yard for a number of years until we acquired the deal with Gulf. We then moved all of our big boat operations to Gulf because there was more room. We had one stationary crane in that Leeville yard. We had to load everything by crane. It was a relief to get situated in that Gulf yard because of the elbow room that we had. We had track cranes in the Gulf yard. They have several acres there compared to what we had. And that heliport we have now has been upgraded. It was about as big as this table in front of me. I think they have about a 900-foot runway there now. We used to have on the north side a burning pit to burn trash – paper bags, old junk pallets. It was nothing hazardous. The environmentalists shut us down on that and now everything has to be picked up and taken to the landfill. We weren't

breaking the law because it was legal to do it in those days. They redone the heliport and upgraded it.

*Does the company own its own helicopters?*

Butch: Chevron owns their own helicopters. Chevron, at one time, was the largest privately owned air force in the world. They may still be. Very seldom they used PHI helicopters.

*Why would they keep their helicopters and get rid of their boats and rigs?*

Butch: That I cannot answer. I do know that it is expensive to operate a helicopter. If something goes wrong with it, it is expensive to operate. I know after so many hours they take them down and x-ray them. Chevron, I am not saying this because I worked with them for over 35 years, is one of the most safest air forces. They have had some that went down. I remember August 1, 1962. I rode in a helicopter maybe three times. The pilot's name was Max Hanna. He was an ex-Marine. He was a Marine captain. He went down. If they found him I didn't know anything about it. What happened was one of the big rotaries came off and cut his tail off. It killed him. The passengers got out. Bill Thomas was in there. It was one of those little bubble nose helicopters where the pilot sits in the front and three passengers in the back. It wasn't no jet ranger like they have now. I don't know how many thousands of dollars Chevron spent on shrimp boats and all trying to locate them. I called St. Germaine on the telephone, it was those hand crank phones back in those days. I told him I needed a plane. He told me he couldn't do it because a plane had went down. I asked him where. He said near you. I looked down and saw all of the boats in the water and I said okay. I thought he was joking because it was April first. If they ever found him I never heard about it. They tried.

*People talk about working on production as being kind of the top job, regular schedules. Is that true?*

Butch: Well, I don't know about it being a top job. It is a good job. When I was out there, we had a little six-man bunkhouse out there on the corner of the platform. Once you stepped out of the bunkhouse you were on the job site. It was an ideal situation as far as I am concerned. The only bad thing about it is that you are away from home. But, you had your seven days at home. It was 17 miles from here to Leeville. Like I said, you have to be careful because you are sitting on a case of dynamite and you shouldn't be foolish. Stop and think and see the big picture. There were safety devices on there and if something happened we had a whistle. It would wake you up in the middle of the night; you knew something was wrong. You had to protect yourself. Daddy always told me to take care of my equipment and it would take care of you. Don't cheat. You could get in trouble.

*What is the average crew on a platform?*

Butch: Well, again I have to go back to 1981. Things have changed since I was out there. Basically, it was a one-man platform. A lot of bigger platforms, *Romeo* for example, you had a day gauger, a night gauger... The platform I was on, I was only by myself in the daytime. Electricians were there at night. He went wherever he needed to in the field during the day. I

was taking care of *Double Echo*, *Double Fox*, three satellites. I could go to *Double Fox* and the three satellites by helicopter, but the *Caisson 1024#16*, I had to go by boat. I took care of those for 10 years by myself. Occasionally I would get a Danos & Curole roustabout. When I had something that needed to get done, I would get them to come. They would come for maybe a week. But, to answer your question, on the *Yankee* platform, the *Zulu* platform, in the daytime they would have about five or six people on them. A platform like I was on, just one person.

*Every day, would you make the rounds of the other satellites?*

Butch: Yes, I had to. A well could shut in out there and you not know it. If the whole platform would shut in, then a light would come on. A well could log up on you. Back in those days we used to wear steel hats. Now it is all plastic. If you come into contact with 110 volts, you can't wear a steel hat. It's all safety. I would take my hard hat and put it over my ears like this. I would get along side of the well near the choke box and you could hear it. If it was making water, the choke box would be warm. Gas wells, you could hear it going through the tube. Back in those days you had those A1 valves with a steel ball in it. You would push that ball offseat and open your well back up and let it start flowing again. They have done away with all that. They were in the process of changing all that when I was transferred to Leeville. There was a way to tell if your well was flowing. You could go look at your bulk chart in your bulk tank and... now if you had a lot of wells making gas, it was hard to tell what well it was shut in. You look at the chart and then check each individual well. You could hear them. You could tell. There are a lot of tricks. Well, they aren't tricks, just common sense.

*Now they have computers?*

Butch: I think they have some computers now. I understand that the computers tell you if the wells are flowing or not.

Emmett: Conoco automated, put sensors on it. They put robots on the valves, automatic switch wells, automatic testers. You get a printout on each thing. It tells you case spreads, pressures, how much oil it is making, and what size. I remember back then they were talking about automating the field. Back then when we had a hurricane or something coming, we would have to shut the wells in. Everybody was worried that automation would take their job. We were all worried about that. It didn't take anybody's job though. It created new jobs. You had at least two or three people working to take care of this stuff. When we would come in for a storm, we would leave everything flowing. If the storm got within 50 miles of the area, they would shut it in from the office in New Orleans. You monitored everything. If there was a tank giving you problems, you could shut it in with the computers. We made a lot of money. Sometimes it would be shut down for a whole week. You would have to go back and get it started. If I shut a platform in, I would want to be the one to open it up because I knew what valve I shut. I went out there one time and my relief had shut it in. One thing I never did do was shut the valve on the discharging pump because there was a check valve right there. The guy shut that valve and I didn't know it. It looked like it was in its right position. When I got everything back on line and got the pump back on, it was making noise. I didn't know what was going on. The valve was closed. Ever since then I always check. I should have checked to start off with. In my mind that

was one of the last valves anyone would have closed. It was a mistake on my part but I learned from it.

*One of the things I found interesting in the video with your father was that after the Depression the company reassembled the crews they were working for. Is that common? On drilling crews or platforms, do you stay with the same crew for a number of years?*

Emmett: Nowadays, times have changed. People got laid off. We had a recession here, in '84 or so. People got laid off and couldn't find jobs so they went and found something else. When it picked back up, these people weren't sure about going back to the oil field because they had adjusted themselves to different salaries and a different way of life. They didn't want to take a chance because they didn't know how long it was going to last. It hurt the oil field quite a bit.

Butch: Right now the oil field is booming.

Emmett: These companies are going through downsizing.

Butch: I went through two mergers—Chevron and Gulf and Tenneco. Now they are going to merge with Texaco. You have got some good people in every major company. I was with Chevron when they had their first layoff ever. They let a bunch of people go. I was surprised with some of the people they let go. I thought they were good people. But, I was in the same company with these people but I wasn't in the same environment. I wasn't on the same platform with them. I was in Leeville and they were offshore. Some of these guys had college educations. I thought they were good people, but really they just put on a good front.

*Was this during the merger with Gulf?*

Butch: It happened shortly after the merger. When we picked up Tenneco, we didn't pick up too many workers because it wasn't that big. They had a lot of contractors. I don't know when this merger with Texaco is going to be. I am not going to worry about it. I know my wife has a cousin who was working for Gulf and now she is working for Chevron. She is in Larose. A couple of weeks ago she told my wife and I that they made them move up to another floor. Texaco handles their floor. It is higher up.

When I started working with Chevron in September 1961, you had to have five years with the company and 35 years of age before you could get stock. I was 23. When I was in my twelfth year, they changed it to only one year. Some of those guys had been there 15, 16, 17 years. They got hired when they were young. Wayne Collier had been there 17 years before he got his first share of stock.

*Were there any main differences between Chevron and Conoco in how they approach the business?*

Emmett: There was a lot of stuff that was different. Like production—they had a lot of employees. We ran a field with 12 employees making 125,000 barrels of oil a day. We had contract people. They weren't big on having contracts. They believed in having their own

people, but look at what it was costing them. At one time, we had 13 rigs in this one field. As soon as we got wells completed, we would start flowing them. We had no facilities for gas at that time. We flared all of our gas until Tennessee Gas came in there and started running pipelines, furnaces, and compressors to put it in the pipelines. We were flaring underneath the water. Millions and millions of gas a day. We had one platform that made 50 million in a day. After we got the pipelines in, it was all separated. That cost a lot of money to keep it thawed out.

Butch: We had our own wireline operators. They had contractors. We did use contractors, but only on certain jobs. We didn't use a contract wireline operator to bail sand. That was our job. We had some special jobs, such as a fishing wireline. Rather than get the rig down there, we would use a contractor. Once you were finished with him, he loads his equipment and goes home.

Emmett: We used to use them boats. We would get our money's worth. In production, we had one living quarter. There were boats bringing people in from Grand Isle every day. Finally, they were talked into doing a four and three operation. Work four days and have off three days. They tried that and it didn't work out too good. People were living at home and by the time you got them out there they couldn't start anything after lunch because they had to leave at a certain time. You would get about four or five hours of work out of those people. You couldn't start any big projects. It fell through after a while, but they were determined to make it work. They were going to do it to all of production. Our contractors came out by boat every morning and they had to leave every afternoon.

*We hear a lot in Morgan City and New Iberia about oil companies going all contract now.*

Emmett: Well, it is cheaper for them to do that because if you want so many people today, you might only need half of those people tomorrow. It costs a lot for employees when you look at the insurance and benefits they offer. You also have vacations, sick leave. I was getting five weeks of vacation when they retired me. It costs us a lot. Actually, all they do is pay a basic [fee] for a contractor and you just tell him what you want done and they go ahead and do it. The contractor has got the insurance on them. They have to have liability insurance on them also. They sign a contract where they can't sue them.

Butch: The bottom line is that it is cheaper for them to deal with contractors. You pay 20 dollars, maybe 25 dollars an hour. What you pay is what you pay.

Emmett: What is bad is that the workers aren't making that kind of money.

Butch: No, they are probably making eight dollars an hour.

Emmett: It is the in-between that is making the money.

Butch: My daddy...if he would be living today he would tell you the same thing I am telling you today. My daddy had the idea of contracting the people before Danos & Curole even started it. When he came down here everybody was talking French. My daddy didn't speak French. He went to Antoine Alario, who had a big construction business going. He was making money hand

over fist. My daddy went to him and said, "If he put up the money, I'll get it going." He wasn't afraid to, but he just didn't want to start another business. He told me 10,000 times he wished he'd listened to Daddy. My daddy had enough foresight to see that this was going to be a thing in the future. Daddy designed a rough sketch on paper of a jackup barge before the first jackup barge was ever built down here. Someone else designed it but it was the same thing. Next thing you know, here comes the jackup barge. I would have loved to have seen him with a college education. He would have been president of some company somewhere. I am not saying where.

#### **7.4. Pershing and Ophelia Lefort (March 5, 2002; Larose, LA)**

*What year did you retire?*

Pershing: 1984. I was fifty-nine and a half.

*Did they have a pension package type of thing?*

Pershing: Very good benefits. Excellent benefits. And a lot of options how you could figure it.

*That was when the oil field was kind of turning down, declining a little bit. Did Texaco retire a lot of people during that period? Did a lot of your friends retire at the same time, pretty much?*

Pershing: Yes, here's what it was. I was going to work till I'm sixty-two and I can't collect social security at fifty-nine, but Texaco gave us a package deal for all those that wanted to take early retirement. But Texaco planned to go through all the days and spend so much money... I don't know it was all in the way of making the...changing the company, making changes in the company throughout. And they made many, many changes but they gave you a choice. It was not forced retirement, none, not one, they gave you a choice. If you want to take an early retirement, they offered you this program and I think it was like a year or a year and a half salary for retirement on the spot, and you had a deadline to make a decision or you got to stay with the company. So why should I at fifty-nine and a half, when you've got to go to sixty-two to get social security, why should I work for Texaco for a year and a half free. If they offer to pay me not to work for a year and a half, if I go work I've got to work for the year and a half salary. By retiring it was still a matter of choice, matter of fact they ask you... there are definite deadline days to meet but they ask you much ahead of time and they brief... I mean we had a briefing meeting. We had all kinds of stuff. They came over here and sat at this very table right here and talked things over with me. They wanted you to have enough time to discuss it with your family. All of us had grown children at that age and your wives... to see, to make sure [of] my decision because it was not reversible. Once you made the decision it's forever and you can never work for a major oil company. You couldn't work for some major company plus some other companies.

Ophelia: You never could after that?

Pershing: Uh huh. That was specifically stated.

Ophelia: I didn't know about that.

Pershing: However, you could be employed, not employed but you could work for any company as a consultant. In other words, I could have gone back to work for Texaco as a consultant. Some of them has. They was very knowledgeable, especially the gas people. Those are real experts. Texaco didn't want to lose these people but they had to be offered the same program as anybody else and therefore that's a decision from way up and whether it was a good decision or not I don't know. It didn't make any sense for me at the time that they were getting rid of experienced men who had made the company. All of us at that age... when I went with Texaco and where I lived it was big but we had to make it bigger and it took us to do it, the people in production, the people who could produce oil and they could send it to the refineries. They had that one pipeline that went to the refineries in Texas. Actually the company never had an active union, not here in south Louisiana. I'm not sure about Texas employees... not here in south Louisiana, no union involvement. You weren't satisfied with Texaco, the union couldn't make you any more satisfied. You know and if you weren't satisfied you'd just leave and go some place else. Oil field experience, once you have that and you are still in good health you won't have any trouble finding a job. There's always somebody looking for good help, you know. But Texaco chose to do that and I couldn't figure out why at the time and I still don't really... why they'd want to get rid of experienced men to hire non-experienced men they got to train. It's sort of... Texaco ended up with Chapter 11. They were constantly in lawsuits... the states, back taxes or not enough taxes or not compensating these people. I don't know. But somehow they usually settled out of court, you know. But they had some settlement to settle. Big settlement. In Texas the refinery used to have a big debt in Louisiana, too. Those taxes and stuff, you know, whatever.

### **7.5. Mac Rome (September 22, 2001; Golden Meadow, LA)**

In those days they'd offer you a pension if you want it or you could have your pension in a lump sum. So I chose the lump sum. They gave me a lump sum to retire. Plus they gave me an incentive. They put 50,000 dollars in an annuity on my name. And I draw the interest every month until I die. I don't ever get the 50,000. Challenge sends me the check every month. And then more in my savings. See, in those times, when I quit, you could save up to 13 percent of your salary. And they would match the first six percent. So it accumulated to quite a bit of money. And the more money you made, the more you saved. So I got a pretty good lump sum of money. I retired [in 1987]... I would've been 60 in April and I retired January the first. So I missed it by three months for 40 years. But at 60 I couldn't get Social Security, not till 62. But they gave me two years of half pay. In other words, every month I'd get half of my salary for two years so I lived for two years on that with a few other things I had, and then when Social Security kicked in, then I was able to start drawing interest off my money with Merrill Lynch. So, I've been living very comfortably.

*Did you get your lawn mowed yesterday in the rain?*

No. Shit, I got caught in the rain. I gotta go this morning when it dries up, I gotta go cut my grass. My boy came borrowed my lawnmower, though. See, I hire my boy to take care of my yard and I go cut my wife's yard for nothing over there. I really need to cut it this morning soon as it dry up. They give showers for this afternoon. And if you let that grass get ahead of you...

## 8. LEGACIES

Port Fourchon, at the very end of the vulnerable highway, LA 1, perhaps best symbolizes what Leon Theriot had in mind. Oil brought the best and the worst to Bayou Lafourche. The best was economic opportunity. The worst involved some shady politics and devastated wetlands.

The port's guiding founder was indicted for letting construction contracts out to his own construction company. Oil didn't bring shady politics to Louisiana, but it made such politics more lucrative. Oil wasn't the sole cause of the frightful loss of land and habitat in south Louisiana, but the port must now mitigate its expansion into surrounding marsh by creating wetlands elsewhere. Oil activity certainly exacerbated the processes of erosion and the intrusion of saltwater into the marsh, but old-timers acknowledge that the inconspicuous *trenasses* of their hunting and trapping fathers and grandfathers may have eroded and widened into the expanses of open water now seen on either side of Fourchon's highway. But Theriot was also acknowledging the prosperity that oil and gas had brought to the region, and is now most evident in the infrastructure of Port Fourchon. Most of the families of the Louisiana coast experienced a piece of this prosperity. And they hope to be spared a direct landfall of a Category 5 hurricane. Such would expose the full environmental and social costs of the lost marsh.

### 8.1. Windell Curole (June 5, 2002; Galliano, LA)

*Born in Cut Off in 1951, Windell is presently director of the Levee District, where he started in 1980; he was trained as a marine biologist. His father was a shrimper and roughneck. Windell's responsibilities (he is also the Emergency Management person for the parish) include making the calls on when to close the flood gate below Golden Meadow in the face of approaching storms – a decision which can get him in trouble with shrimpers and utility boat operators who may get stuck on the outside. Windell is something of a local historian and culture broker, taking every opportunity to speak out on "Cajunism." He will also make calls to the local radio talk show, hosted by "Truck," when no one else is calling in.*

I remember that basically the oil companies... the bosses, they didn't talk like us. Had Southern accents. I don't consider us having Southern accents. I remember there are times that I would try to communicate with them. Try to sound a little bit more like them. I said I would never try to sound like somebody else. As long as people can understand me. That always kind of stuck with me. I don't care whether it's a boss or what. I am going to stay who I am and be who I am. I do remember that. But again in the oil field, you had a lot of people from Texas and Oklahoma were coming out. I do remember also that in the first grade, pretty little girl, and I think she was from Texas. Smart and pretty but because she was different, *Texien*, a lot of kids picked on her. And I never understood that, you know? And it was part of, I think, that cultural clash, an "us and them" type of thing. I can see the unfairness of that. Of course, we all experienced it in the opposite direction. When I left and went to college, I felt some of that same...just because I spoke differently. Came from a different background. But I understood that going in and why it was not a good thing. But again, that was the oil industry causing that happening. This cultural exchange. Heard stories too when, you know, things really broke loose in oil. Back in Leeville and Golden Meadow where every weekend was like a western town with shootouts and murders.

I think part of it was a cultural clash that the oil industry brought on. A lot of people might look at it from today's standards but if you go back into the '30's life was rough. There was a lot of "us" and "them." There wasn't that much around that you could keep so that had a big part of what people were. You know, looking at oil there is no doubt it made a major impact on the culture of this area.

There's terrific changes in what this place would have been with and without the oil industry. And I have heard people talking in both directions. People say, and they are correct, we would have gotten by. We would have always eaten well. We would have always had a good life. But we might have not had much money. Oil did provide constant money...it did change. There is some very good people that came in from Oklahoma, Texas, and northern Louisiana. We came from Cheniere Caminada. People came from all over. Islaños, Philippinos, Chinese. And we formed a society from that and moved over here after the hurricane. Well, this is just another move and after that culture had tightened up. So now it had evolved again. I like to believe there was some hybrid vigor involved, that there were some real positive things with culture coming in. People with different ideas. I think, although there is always friction when you get two cultures together, I think it came out to be a very vibrant culture. It continues to be vibrant. Lafourche, I think, has always been ahead when it comes to technology. Our fisherman, from day one, were always moving forward. So you had this marriage of the fishing industry and experience on the water. And oil comes. Well, the Texans and Oklahomans knew how to drill. But they did not know how to navigate a boat. Did not know how to deal with the waters. And that's where our people took off and the experience with the supply boats and later on. But again you tie that experience in the water with technology coming in and our people always being on the cutting edge of technology even though most of these guys did not have high school educations, they knew how to work things. They knew how things worked. And it really did help them do work. They taught themselves how to make it work. That's why when offshore Louisiana happened it was boats from Louisiana. And when offshore happened in the North Sea it was tugboats from Louisiana, and the Persian Gulf, it was tugboats from Louisiana. And it continued worldwide. The navigation and seamanship of the people from the bayou. That's the mixture of the two cultures.

On the negative side, you have the power. When you have something like oil I mean it is the power. Money is power. Power corrupts. You have that thing of single-mindedness in getting something done. It's all business, dangerous business. So you attract people who take risks... I don't know how you would say how it would be without the oil industry. It was a tremendous impact but again tremendous power. And again in the '30's oil was being discovered in Louisiana in a big way, big companies coming in. And you had Huey Long come in and the way of governing in general... well, I say Louisiana was a poor state but there were a lot of poor states in the '30's. And then all of a sudden you had big money coming in. And a little bit of money to a poor state, to that individual it looks like a lot. You know the free textbooks, free meals, the roads. That was a good... hell of a job. So you don't care if that guy's slapping off a few hundred thousand dollars 'cause you know you're better off than you were before. And that was a deal made with the devil and that's how we do it. We weren't going to bother government as long as [it] provided for us and as long as Big Oil was paying the bill. Then all of a sudden people don't have to be involved in the government or worried about government so much because the money's not coming directly out of their pocket. Even though a lot of the time you

don't realize that the money that could've gone in your pocket never gets in your pocket. You don't realize it if you never had it.

And in Louisiana this is kind of the problem we've had over the past maybe 20 years is that we're still living under that political influence. I mean when you grew into a -- I don't know if you call it a rut or a method of doing things or a mentality of doing things -- it takes a long time to change it, when you have generations follow what was successful at that time. In government you had the elected officials, as long as you liked them you put them in. Big Oil paid the bill. When Big Oil stopped paying the bill you can't run the same way. You started seeing a change I think in our politics. We've been running the same politics since the '30's. I think when Big Oil stopped paying a lot of the bills we started having to look in other directions. All of a sudden some of the money is coming out of our pockets directly and never getting in our pockets. And so people became a little more disgruntled with government and made it more accountable and you started seeing some changes. You started electing, you know, people like Dave Treen got elected (1980). Bill Roemer was elected (1988). Of course I'm talking about my time and I was paying more attention to the politics of the day. But I still think even when you had the reform governors elected before that, from what I can read in history we made no real big changes as far as the real fabric, the real main thread of how government was run. But you could start seeing a change with Roemer getting elected and Treen. We couldn't run the way we used to run. They had to be more accountable to the people, more accountable to where the money was coming from and how you was spending it.

Now another thing with Big Oil was that although we used to have business -- companies -- based here in Louisiana, the big guys were always in Texas. Now that to me is a profound difference too between Texas and Louisiana. They were making, you know pulling a bunch of oil out of the ground, owners like Texas Company becoming Texaco became very big because of what they found in Louisiana. Yet the corporation headquarters where the money was really coming from is in Texas. And that was always there and it's become more and more based out of Texas. So you know I've always felt if we had the presidents of all the big oil companies living here in our area that a lot of things on the negative side of what oil had done would not have occurred. That things would have been better. I mean you don't do things in the backyard that... if you're just looking at money you don't worry about somebody else's backyard. And I think things would have been... you know I know this would have been different than what took place over here.

And then from the environmental aspect nobody back in the '30's cared about cutting through marsh or dumping oil. There were blowouts in Golden Meadow where people moved out of their houses and not too much was made of it. Their roofs were ruined, and you got your drinking water from rainfall that hit on the roof that went into your cistern. So when the blowout took place you could ... you know your water supply was ruined, you had to move somewhere else. But no big deal came out of this. The other thing the oil did -- cutting up the marsh -- nobody knew the marsh was really [valuable] so there was not a big outcry. You can't say that there was a bad guy/good guy such a thing. It was just doing work and all along the community was putting the boats through and doing the dredging. We were all part of it. But my mother told me one thing that when they started building the canals near the Leeville area, not far from where my grandpa's camp was, that's when they stopped going to the camp to trap 'cause again

she said they'd noticed that they were catching less muskrat 'cause things had changed. There was no doubt that it changed because you had more salt water where muskrats did better with fresher water. And the trap company -- my grandfather used to trap -- gets 150 muskrat a day with 10, 20 mink, an otter or two and those numbers just dropped after the pipeline canals started coming in. You know the oysters have been ruined with the spills that occurred. And really the science behind what was going on probably didn't get to us until about the '60's and '70's.

Now what's taken place since the '60's and '70's... the government knew what was going on, the oil companies knew about the damage, but it was mostly looked at as a tree hugger type of thing and not really anything that affected people in their everyday life. As time was going on and the Gulf of Mexico's gotten closer because of some of that, we know that it has made a difference. But at the same time we need to be looking at all of the facts and... but the major fact is why we have this marsh-loss issue is because we've leveed up the Mississippi River. We have more people living here and oil companies are partly responsible for more people living here, there is more need for protection, more need for protecting homes and drying out areas so that kind of ties together. But the point is you can't point the finger. Like I tell people often, if we can get a systemic solution to our land-loss issue by getting all the Mississippi River and its sediments back to where we need to get them, now we can probably heal most of the scars that have been left by the oil industry, so I don't put those issues on the doorstep of oil industries.

It's mostly flood control, but there is no doubt the oil industry has, I guess, exacerbated the situation and made it much worse with the navigation canals, the flotation canals, the location canals, the pipelines canals that have done all this crisscrossing. Where we have all this induced saltwater coming in here. We have a battle between the Mississippi River building land, the Gulf of Mexico taking land back. Well all the things we've done for flood control first was the major big step in giving the advantage to the... we tied one hand back and let the Gulf start eating. Secondarily though we came in with the oil industry right after and tied the other hand back by helping out the Gulf of Mexico bring in more saltwater. So those two things are tied together. But if we ever get the river going back again, provided we have a political will to do what we need to do, we can go ahead and get systemic solutions and again heal most of the damage that was done by the oil industry.

*So you have no emotional appeal to levees even though you're running the Levee District?*

I look at things realistically. You know in this world everything cuts two ways. There is nothing that is all pure white or pure black or pure good or pure bad. The optimum situation is that you do things where you cut more on the positive side than on the negative side. And that's the issue you look at. And I did, prior to this job here, I did a degree in marine biology, working with the fishing industry. And coming over here, this is my community though. It's a fishing community. That's the way I look at it. Right now we're tremendous in oil support but a fishing community and for us to continue living here we have to build these levees. These levees have impacted the area that it encircles but as far as the big problem with the marsh loss, it is not the systemic solution. It doesn't impact Mississippi River water coming to our area by building these levees. So it is a different type of levee system. Now I don't want to minimize that it has impacted. But if we do get systemic solutions we won't allow water in the marshlands inside the system. It's been dried out anyway. But this is the tradeoff, this is how we've looked at it – with

our coastal zone management committee – is that we're south of the Intracoastal some 426,000 acres, all right. All of it can be classified as wetlands. Every bit of land that was built here was built on floods, so you can... one of the ways of describing what a wetland is you can describe this whole area as a wetland.

We basically carved out 35,000 acres to live and work off of and our goal is to say, look, inside of this perimeter, we're going to destroy wetlands and we're going to do what's right for human beings and do business and do all these things but the other 400,000 acres we are going to try to maintain them. Because again, it's all compromise. It's what life's about. It's compromise. We're human beings. It's us and the environment we live and the environment and every part of it, well, every part of it. We use up stuff just like every animal uses up stuff in the environment, but the point is don't use it up so that the reason you're living there isn't good anymore. Plus to protect ourselves from flooding but not to have the marshes around us, we'd just as soon live in Cleveland, Ohio because we're different people. We're not the same people anymore. So I don't look at it as a rationalization. I look at it as building the community and be here and doing the other side because we have traded this all... I look at my job on the outside as to try and maintain those wetlands for many different reasons but also for the levee to exist, but also for our lifestyle to exist.

The Rotary sent me to France for professional exchange, and I talked about the fishing industry basically and also about some of the environmental problems that we have and concerns. And the guy that was ahead of me who talked about agriculture, he introduced me as the guy... my job is to keep the wetland wet and the dry land dry. And I thought that was a pretty good description of what we try to do even to this day -- same type of thing. It's very difficult. You know you talk about fairness and what we do right or not right. The other thing with the oil industry is that yeah, there is some environmental damage. Us living here causes environmental damage. People living in Arizona cause environmental damage. But in the big discussion that we have with oil... a lot of people paint us as the big evil... but the fact of the matter is every time you put that nozzle to your vehicle you're subsidizing that industry. Now if you're subsidizing it, you share in that evil. If you don't want to face the fact of what they are... so if you don't want oil drilling, my opinion is you have grounds to stand on if you don't drive a car, if you don't use airplanes, if you don't use cheap energy cause that's what oil does for us -- it gives us cheap energy. Now if you use that cheap energy and you say well we need to drill but we need to do it in certain ways -- let's pay the price and do it a little bit safer, a little bit cleaner -- to me that is legitimate and that gives you grounds to stand on. I'll see people get in planes and fly over and live in nice hotels and drive their car and go to a public hearing and say "I don't want any drilling." Well that seems highly hypocritical to me. Now maybe I'm cutting it too close or too sharply but there seems to be a disconnect again when you use these things and you say you're against it, that is too large a dose of hypocrisy.

Now on the other side you have the other thing that when people say well you know we care about people and if you give a community cancer and not care and people do that... if you pollute waters, if you... "Well, I'm a businessman and I'm here to make as much money as possible and I can do all of this and a few people pay the price for me, well..." So that's the other side of the spectrum, too. I believe there is responsibility on the industry side also to say, "Look, I've come in here, I've done damage and I want to work with people to minimize the

damage that I'm doing and I want to be fair." And fair... there should always be a discussion of what's fair.

I think there are some real people in the oil industry now that do understand that it's more than just making the buck, that you need to live with the people that you're around and the environment 'cause your family lives in that environment. You know you're going to suffer... that's the other thing about having the presidents of the companies living in the area -- as long as they're here and breathing the same air and drinking the same water that their company's working at ... I have no arguments with any industrialists but I mean I'm talking about two extremes and neither one of them are good, I think, to society. We need to have the middle where we try to be fair, try to find the fairness of both. Everybody wants a fat paycheck. I don't know anybody that doesn't like to have a pocket full of money. I don't know anybody that doesn't enjoy clean water. I don't [know] anybody that doesn't enjoy having healthy children. And both extremes don't allow it and I know whether it's oil or any kind of industry, you're trying to find the fairness thing and I think just living off of oil's money is a wrong thing. I think it needs to be two ways as far as government and how you deal with oil.

But the other side is government -- our federal government -- the way it works. Here in south Louisiana we're running pipelines through and supplying the offshore oil. Three billion dollars is going to the federal government and if you're a business man, CEO of government USA, and I see three billion dollars coming into my treasury in my business, well you know what I'm going to make sure the road to that gold mine stays in good shape. I'm going to make sure that things that protect that infrastructure are in good shape and yet government doesn't see it that way. We're paying the environmental price and we basically accept that environmental price. But give us some of the resources back to deal with... to mitigate those losses so we can continue doing what we're doing. From that perspective the United States is taking total advantage of south Louisiana and not being at all in any fashion being fair. Now I understand how it works and I'm not blaming people 'cause I think if the roles were reversed, if Louisiana reversed roles with Florida and California with the big population and the power to be as unrealistic as you want to be, I'm not saying they wouldn't either. You know people are people, but the point is I think people need to or should try to work for fairness.

It's really hard to deal with when you hear Barbara Boxer, Californian, talk about the price of gas and how terrible it is and how ... but for their representative to complain about it and in the next breath say "I don't want any drilling up in my coasts and not only that, I don't want any drilling up in ANWR, I don't want any..." You know it's like I'm complaining about the price of milk but I won't allow a cow in the state. Same thing. There's a bit of hypocrisy in all that, I mean I understand what politicians are built on but it just seems... it's again just because you're powerful enough to be unrealistic it's still not right. And that's why I believe that the message would get out to the American people. I don't believe we have that problem 'cause we have caring people and if you know the facts... that goes back to Jefferson, you have to have an educated populous to get the right things done. And once the word is out I think it's going to happen, but in the political system if John Doe, the senator from Montana, sends three hundred million dollars to Louisiana every year and the people of Montana don't understand why, the next guy running against him says, "You know what your senator did? He sent three hundred million dollars that we could spend here in Montana." Now if an educated populace knows that

three hundred million helps keep the price of gas down in Montana, that guy can't use it against him. And that's our problem, that's a big thing.

*Does Louisiana's past political history that you were talking about earlier, is that still haunting the present?*

Oh, absolutely. There's no doubt about it, I mean we jump on it a little bit more because we're not as shy about the facts of life. We have a little bit of that European feeling, you know, that we're human beings whatever that is so we show our scars a little bit easier than most people. We laugh about them more, we're entertained by them more because look, you might as well laugh about it rather than run and hide like a lot of east coast puritan-type people do, you know. But I mean you look at other places like Chicago has its traditional... the big cities all have them. You hear about some of the things with unions and all the deals that happened that way but in fact, you're correct, the way that business has been done in Louisiana plays against us. There's no doubt about it. But I believe we're in the realm of changing that. I really think we're on course because of the things I talked to you about earlier. We are at the point where we are making strides forward. I know a lot of people leave this place because of the negative things that are taking place. They aren't able to get jobs that pay the level of their education and intelligence yet the opportunity unveils itself to come back and they come back. This is a special place. Now there are a lot of special places in the United States, a lot of different places but by talking to people who are visiting from outside and a little bit of traveling out there – it is a special place.

Now why would you say that? Well I think it starts off with the Mississippi River. You only have so many third largest rivers in the world. This is the one, and it built this place. Now there aren't too many places that are as big as this platform, this large, that has been built by a river in the United States, none. There are none. So we have these millions of acres that have been brought here by a river. Tremendous biological productivity and then renewable productivity and then underneath all this great platform we can jump out into the Gulf. We trade from it. The muscle of the United States comes right down to this point of land and then on top of all those benefits we find frickin' oil underneath. So this is a special place and because of it, because of the river being here we have all these cultures that have come into south Louisiana. And then after that culture's kind of melted together like two-day-old gumbo, really starts mixing good, tastes good, and then you have the oil industry bringing in this new group of people, new group of Americans. At the same time mass media came in and this all added into part of the mix, the Texans and Oklahomans come in and then mass media. You hear the outside world, which those people tied into a little more than we are because it was more of their style, more the American way. And we had a different language, I mean I'm seventh generation and the first one to speak English first. I learned how to speak English from French people because my whole community was French and in this transition oil played a big part along with World War II and along with mass media in the transition of the language.

*How about politics within the parish, north and south?*

Yes, there is a real difference because there were American farmers who came down on the plantations up here so all of a sudden the rich leaders were English speaking, some Protestant,

and the people that lived off the land became secondary and basically sold their front land along the bayou and moved back to Chackbay and continued to trap and stuff. So all of these things started to take place and that changed. So leadership over here... I grew up in a place where we had hard-working fishermen that was a little bit brighter than the others or was a little more aggressive than others, they began to have political careers. And they were French, they didn't worry about being French and... but the leaders in another part of the parish were the American, more educated. Now that's another difference. There was better education in the north part of the parish. We had some in the southern part but not, I don't think as pervasive or with as many people. If there's anything that we lacked as a people down here was the written word. If we had just had the written word and understood the written word, we would have not been taken advantage of so much and there were a lot of people taken advantage of. You can read the stories of people, their leases being bought out for hardly nothing, pennies, and these are the people becoming millionaires on those pennies. And that's from lack of education, that to me has always been the Achilles' heel of this area, 'cause it was always easy to make a living, not an easy living, easy to keep your stomach full... hard work to do it, hard to make money but easy to get to the point of a good sustenance and a little bit more.

When you grow up as a kid you didn't like something that was happening in school... My father was a good example of that. In sixth grade he got sent to the principal's office for doing something and he just didn't want to go so he went home. And he was on the shrimp boat the next day and that was it. And a lot of kids were that way. You know you worked, you earned for the family and you could do it and it was...and you can still do that today. You still have kids that can go with 5,000 dollars, buy a boat and make a living, feed their family. Now you're not going to be rich but if you're smart -- as long as you can read and write -- if you're smart you can become a billionaire. There are some of those running around. You know there has always been a land of opportunity, in this area it's always been there. But people have made opportunity because they've been aggressive with new technology and new ideas. There has always been that... I can't tell you that people as a group, but this area allows the people who are inventive to be that way. That's also a difference from north and south. You tend to be more of what you are down here. There's less role-playing, less trying to fit into somebody else's idea of what you should be. More freedom, I guess you would call it, closer to Jeffersonian democracy, you know small investment, you're independent, shoot your finger at whoever you want 'cause you know you can go make it somewhere else down here. I think that was Jefferson's idea of a bunch of small farms, but that never did work out because farms got bigger and bigger and more people working on the farms. It went against what he thought was good. But down here because of this tremendous volume of natural resources we've been able to keep kind of that flavor of being independent and vote for who you want to.

Well, it's been an exciting ride. It's always been an exciting place. People talk about this sleepy little town on the bayou. This place goes 24 hours. I mean you couldn't do this... when I tell people that a little bitty town used to... our band used to start at midnight and go until four in the morning in Golden Meadow, Louisiana... yeah, maybe in New Orleans but certainly not... I mean that's how it is. You know you work 24 hours... we have a 24 hour society. When you are a fisherman you work when you need to work. You know in the oil field you work when you need to work and vice versa, you play when you need to play if it means all night long you go all night long. But you always wish things had been... that things would be better, but there is so

much that would have been easier had we had more dollars but the world was poor. You never solve all the problems. When I look I just says it's been a really good ride and it's been interesting. And one of these *Texiens*, a friend of mine from high school, I went to all honors classes with her from ninth grade on, and she grew up and she was inspired to get into science because of Dr. Breaux and Dr. Guidry. You talk about the mixing of cultures, and she is the first person to splice genetic material. Now that's big. You know her major professor won the Nobel Prize in '93, that was the main deal. So yeah, it makes me feel good you know the girl sitting right next to me, a friend of mine from high school, did that, you know. So that's the mixing of the cultures.

## **8.2. Ronald Callais (June 6, 2002; Golden Meadow, LA)**

*Are there any kind of contentious issues around the Levee District?*

If you've been through Golden Meadow or you came in the back road on the bayou, if you came along the bayou around the bridge you saw water. Well, that's water seeping underneath, because the winds come from the southeast and driving the water up the bayou. It's not high enough for us to justify closing the gate. But it's high enough that with a locking chamber... you just close and open the locking chamber. You can't do it with the floodgate. Because the floodgate can take just so much pressure or it'll warp. And with a locking chamber you can always equalize pressure. You never have that pressure against that gate. Because they say, I don't understand the hydraulics of it, you got your levels like this, let's suppose the bayou is this high and inside the bayou's like this. When you got a locking chamber, you take water and you raise the level inside. Well, that outside gate has no pressure, 'cause you've equalized it till you open it. The inside one has no pressure 'cause you have constant water. Then you get whatever you want, then you close it and you're on the level coming the opposite way. So you don't have the pressures against that gate that you would normally have with just a gate, a floodgate, versus a locking chamber. So we could open it more often. We could keep traffic flowing through Bayou Lafourche at all times. Even during a hurricane, we can keep traffic flowing through Bayou Lafourche. Like we press the Coast Guard, and the Corps of Engineers. Right now, see, a locking chamber, you're looking at is 6 million. We've got boats that got to be worth 10 and 12 million dollars apiece. You lose one boat, that's twice the value of the locking chamber. And look at the economics of it. Once the level of the bayou gets to a certain... we can't open that gate. Where does that boat go? It's too late for them to go all the way around and find another gate. He can't go out to the Gulf again. So he's gotta spend the hurricane right there. Not only that, now all these boats come in for hurricanes, make it in, the hurricane passes by. It might be five or six days before the tide goes down low enough to allow us to open the gate. What do the boats do? They're caught inside the system. That's lost opportunity for those boats to go out and work. So the economic justification is there, it's just financing. We gotta come up with the money. But the beauty of it is if we can come up with the six million, and it looks like we'll get it, the Corps of Engineer has approved the system and will accept it as part of our flood system. Which means we're gonna get 70 percent reimbursement. So if we put up six million, we get 4,200,000 dollar credit from the Corps of Engineers against any future work we got to do. So we can continue to do the whole system, and we got 4.2 million dollars' worth of credit. We don't have to come up with any money. That 4.2 million dollar credit, a 30 percent basis matching funds, means that we can get 'bout our 4.2 plus 4.2 plus, almost 19 million worth of work from

the Corps of Engineers. Don't cost us a penny. They just parlay. It's a great deal for us, but we gotta be able to come up with the money from the state. The initial money. Now the state had originally promised four and a half million, and we'd come up with a million and a half ourselves. But then, when our present governor in that menopause moment of his decided to screw the tax structure, he screwed up everything. Now our local legislators were able to cut a deal where they would furnish us the money, but it won't be this year like they promised us. I'm confident we'll come up with it.

*Is the levee fully complete now?*

It encircles the whole Tenth Ward, yes. The inhabited part. It's three separate lifts. Some places does not have the third lift. Some places might not need the third lift, because land didn't subside as much as they thought it would. However, our levee was designed to withstand a category three hurricane. We were lookin' at possibly having to upgrade to category four or five, which means we'll have to go again, with probably at least two more lifts, to get the level, although lifts are much cheaper than the original one. Now you've got somewhere to work. The canals are dug, work, but naturally the cost of construction goes up. So how long we wait to do it... Another thing we've been informed is that there is a tremendous loss of marshlands, of wetlands. The Coast Guard and the Corps of Engineers has told us that we should consider possibly putting rip-rapping at the base of our levees. Putting heavy rocks, because pretty soon the Gulf will be lapping against the base of our levees. There's no way they can survive that. So that's what is so important about these marsh restorations, coastal restorations, so critically important to us. Just look at the map, look at the white property, look at the marsh area. There's just so little of it, you know. Just like fingers out there. When I was a kid, you'd go to Grand Isle, I'd go to Grand Isle on an old gravel washboard road, you know, you'd chatter your teeth. From Golden Meadow to Grand Isle used to be an hour, an hour and half. In those days, you went 20 miles an hour you were really pushing it. Going up that gravel road. But you go... see this seafood plant, the Thomassies between here and Leeville, the big blue building. Right there, coming towards Golden Meadow I 'member as a kid, trees on both sides of the road, almost touching, like going through a tunnel. Now do you see any trees there? Every now and then you might see a scraggly old tree or a dead trunk of a tree. Saltwater intrusion killed all that. The marshes were just as green. Look like you could walk across that. 'Course you wouldn't dare, you'd sink to your death. But it looked like grasslands. A lot of people would come down here, outsiders come, "Look at all the prairies you got over here." It's not prairies, it's marshlands. You can't put cows, you can't build on that. But looking at it, it looked like it was good, high dry land, you know. Now, it's unbelievable. It's something we can't reverse, just maybe we can slow it down.

*Who do people blame for marsh loss?*

The conventional wisdom is oil companies cutting the canals. Now that contributes to it. But I found out something very recently that I wasn't aware of. I attended a presentation by Dr. Gagliano. Dr. Gagliano is with, I think he's with LSU, and he's doing a project on freshwater diversion and marsh rebuilding. And he says that we've got three definite fractures in this area. One is called, I think, the Leeville, the Golden Meadow and the Lockport. There was three. Well, actually, your rock base is actually sinking at approximately a foot a year. That explains a

lot of... you know, I can see marshes washing away. But why, and I know that when you're a child, everything seems bigger. But why was it when I was a kid I was in Golden Meadow and I'd go to the bayouside and I'd have two feet of bank above the bayou. And I go right now at a mean tide the water's right there. Sinking! I mean, the oceans haven't come up two feet since I was a boy. The only other explanation is the ground is sinking. Now, did it sink that much? Is it a combination of sinking and erosion? All those things, you know. I realize he said a foot in a century, but still that accounts for some of it. You're looking at 50 years ago. So six inches mighta been there. Oceans mighta come up a few inches. You've got, you've had your natural subsidence because this used to be wet all the time. Now you put a levee, you pumped it out, like a sponge, it dries up, it shrinks. That's all part of it, you know. But it's a combination of all of those. Now, I know that those canals put all that salt water in there. Salt water comes in and these are fresh water plants, vegetation. Kills it. Actually, because of the great tides now that you never used to have before... You'd get a high tide at Fourchon, it'd take a week for it to get to Golden Meadow. Now within one day it's there. Well, as fast as the water comes in, once that tide drops off that water wants to go out. It's rushing out through these cuts and these gaps. What's this doing? It's tearing away vegetation as it goes. So it's not only killing it, it's physically ripping it out. And that just accelerates.

Plus, the thing that made it feasible for us to live down here, is what's slowly killing us. That's the channelizing of the Mississippi River. Look at this here. [Goes to map.] This is the river coming with all this silt, it gets down to the Head of the Passes. It slows down. Now you've got natural erosion, you've got natural building. Did this for centuries, millions and millions of years. What do we do? We put the levee along the river. We closed off Bayou Lafourche, so natural water doesn't go down Bayou Lafourche anymore. We open up all those shoals and all these things. What happen? The water comes up at such a speed it passes this point and goes down below the Outer Continental Shelf. It's gone. It never comes back here again. That's part of our problem. Now people don't realize that's part of our problem. We not only are losing, we've lost the ability to replace... now I'm not saying channelizing the river and the levee... it was great for us. It allowed us to live here, 'cause we couldn't live with the continual flooding. But that's what destroying our environment.

*So what's the future? Just to try and slow it down?*

Slow it down as much as we can. As part of the Levee District I'm on a committee on the Lafourche Basin Levee District, one of our sister districts. We share common jurisdiction. And they just had a settlement with Texaco and part of the funds have to be used for coastal restoration. We met last Wednesday and we meet once every two months, we'll meet more often. And we've a few dollars, not much money, but it's a few dollars. One of things that came out of the meeting, I said, "Guys, we got to realize. There's certain things that with all the money in the world, there's nothing you can do to stop. Let's sit down and figure what is achievable, what we can do. And concentrate on that. We're gonna lose it, no matter we're gonna lose it. Write it off. Save what you can." And one of the things, one of the engineers, he says, a lot of things are as simple as taking the channel that might be at one time... he showed us pictures, he says, as simple as a channel that mighta been, say 50 feet wide at one time, now it's 800 feet wide. He says, come here, put rock. It mighta been four feet deep, now it's 20 feet deep. Close it in. Restrict that water. Don't let that water come in as fast as it was comin' in.

Now, it's not the damage coming in, it's the damage going out. He said if you restrict that smaller area, naturally you have a tremendous current at that point, but that's all rock. It's not eroding. What you're doing is you're killing the pulling affect on the inside that's ripping out the roots of these. So, just as simple as that. You see, you're not restoring anything, you're stopping the further loss. Then you can look at restoring. Once you stop the loss, then you can look at... Dr. Gagliano has a plan of coming down from here, basically, not too far from where the Davis Pond is at. He's talkin' about coming in here, somewhere around here, digging a channel parallel to Bayou Lafourche, till you get to Lockport. Gets to Lockport, it splits. Cross the Barataria Estuary, then it goes to Timbalier. Have fresh water coming in. Now, what you gonna do in Lockport, wherever you cross, dam up Bayou Lafourche. You maintain the level of water. Big fight they're having right now is that they're gonna put water in Bayou Lafourche... Because they don't want no water in the bayou. This plan solves both problems. Dam off the Bayou Lafourche, you basically make a lake out of Bayou Lafourche. You maintain that level. The water bypasses coming in here. Second plan is even a better plan for us. You come down Bayou Lafourche with about a two foot pipe. You pump pure slurry from the river, unlimited quantity from the river. Pump it down in, get to Lockport, split it in half...

*Shouldn't be a hard sell, but it seems to be.*

People are, through no fault of their own, people are just selfish. "What's in it for me?" "How does it directly affect me?" And a guy living in Montana raising cattle don't give a shit 'bout what's happening in Louisiana. He won't give a buck as long as he's taken care of. I'm not saying it's right or it's wrong. But that's human attitude. Humans, that's the way humans are.

### **8.3. Pep and Bertha Williams (September 21, 2001; Galliano, LA)**

*Has the levee made it a lot safer from storms now?*

Pep: It don't wash, it don't wash.

Bertha: Yeah, as long as those levees gonna hold, they tell you they all alright. But they tell you.

Pep: Well, they still reinforcing them, they're still working on them. You know, they go down and then they rebuild them again. Top it.

Bertha: 'Cause our worst storm is when whenever it come from the back.

Pep: When the storm is on the west side, that's when we get our water. If the storm is on the east side, well, we dry over here. But if she's on the west side, that give us some water.

Bertha: That's why they build the levee in the back.

Pep: Yeah, there's levee all around now, up to Larose, yeah.

Bertha: But I mean, it's not for the bayou that they doing the levee, it's for holding that pressure water from the marsh that's coming in.

*We hear the storms are worse because of all the loss of marshes and wetlands. Do you see that or do you hear that?*

Pep: Yeah, well, we don't have all them islands, all washed away. We don't have no more protection left. The olden days we had all them islands, that would kind of protect us, some. But that's all washed away now. So really, the wave is closer to us, it getting the Gulf closer to us because we don't have no more protection. All them islands is all washed away. That's why they tried to rebuild it, yeah. But it's a losing cause.

Bertha: There's no way they gonna rebuild the islands.

Pep: It's kind of hard to do it. If they were maintaining it while the island was there, they'd reinforced it, they woulda been better off. But now that the island is gone, it's kind of hard to, that sand washed away. That's why it don't hold up.

Bertha: It's like at Leeville Bridge, when you get down on the other side, I mean, that's water. Well, whenever he retired, there was no water there. It was all land. It was all water now. Now a lady's told me a little hardhead person gonna get stuck over there, on the other side of the river. And they gonna be wonder why. It's not that they're not notified. But they think that bridge is working, and like it did two weeks ago, it broke, some boat hit it. And they say six to seven mile on each side packed with people. There was one cop that was bringing a patient with a heart attack. They had to bring it as far as they could and get a boat to transfer that man, or that lady, that patient, to bring it to The Lady of the Sea (the hospital in Galliano) in a boat. They have to study it, study it. By the time they study it, it's washing away. Like I said, it's like, 'bout eight years ago there was land, and now there's no more land on that side. And you just have the roads there. And like his office was, well, they had to keep it up, or that would be in the water already, in Leeville. And when you come from this corner, you can see all the water. Well, that's always dirt. I mean that was all solid marsh, it was dirt, it was grass. Now there's nothing. So that's where you get all those engineers to study. Well, they don't have no more money. And they know what they have to do. They know what they have to do. They have to get themselves organized before they do all the study. Now it's too late, they can't do nothing. Now with the road, it's supposed to be building a road going to Grand Isle, to Fourchon. By the time they get organized to do it, there won't be no more road completely.

Pep: Well, that gonna be an elevated road.

Bertha: Well, there won't be no other way to do it. Gonna be expensive. And there's no other way, 'cause they won't have no road at all to go. Those peoples at Fourchon, they got quite a lot of money invested in those beautiful homes. I guess you'd call that camps. *Some camps.* And what's coming up with all that water, it's going to be funny to get the supplies to there.

*What's responsible for all the loss of the marshes?*

Bertha: They claim it's the salt water that killed the grass. And after the grass was gone, well any little current, those boat would pass, any little current would make that sand or whatever,

that loose dirt washed away. That's why a lot of places they trying to put out some grass. Some kind of grass. That's work but they can't put it off. They don't have no dirt to put the grass. Sure, around here they do it, on the bayouside. But they still have dirt to put it. But in the marshes over there they don't have no more dirt to put it. And it's salt water. Before they used to have all fresh water. Then salt water from the Gulf came in. Even last night, yesterday afternoon, when I went to Golden Meadow and came back, there was two little boats that was trawling in the bayou. To trawl in the bayou, you have to have the salt water. They was trawling in that bayou. They had those nets that they put on the side of the little boat. They was doing that. Maybe that's a living, maybe you want a dish of shrimp. But that shows you that the salt water is down here, too, in that bayou.

*So back when you were growing up in Golden Meadow, they weren't trawling in the bayou?*

Pep: It was just fresh water.

Bertha: The bayou was too small. It was just a small bayou. But now it goes and it goes. Like going to Leeville, that stretch going before you get to Leeville, it was just a bayou. Just a little bayou that only one boat could pass. And look how big it is now.

Pep: It's getting wider and wider.

Bertha: Wider. You can notice by the telephone... the light poles. Some is still underground, but some. And that's the one that washed away 'cause it was all underground.

*But was it artificially widened when the oil industry started?*

Pep: No, it's the current. Current.

*But it wasn't dredged?*

Pep: No, no.

Bertha: That's when I said, we talk. You hate think about it. You hate think 'bout it, 'cause you don't know when the young generation gonna end up. They're younger and they're not prepared. They think that things was like that all time. No, it was not. It got that way. And it gonna get worse and worse. 'Cause you have more currents, you have more boat traffic. That's a lot more than we used to have. Before it was only a shrimp boat, and like my husband said, it was a small boat. But now you have those big boats. You have those big barges, those big tugs that's using that water. And the more water they're using, the more currents, the more suction it make.

*Somebody was telling about a canal, the British canal. On the other side of Golden Meadow.*

Pep: *Canal Briton.* That goes out to the Little Lake. On the east side, what they call the Little Lake, the Little Lake. Where that Briton Canal leads up to that Little Lake.

Bertha: They have a bridge across.

Pep: That's where LOOP is, back there, all them oil reserve tanks.

*Why was the Canal Briton built?*

Pep: I don't know.

Bertha: I think it was just like you all would call a *trenasse*. It was a small ditch for the trappers go. And they would have the lake in the back and then they could go fishing and things. And it got bigger and bigger. It started, like it shows the other day on TV. It was on TV the other day.

Pep: Yeah, you told me. I didn't see it, but you told me about that. They was showing that. How it was originally started there.

Bertha: There was a man in the pirogue and he had his traps in the other pirogue, in the back. And he was going to that lake. I didn't know which lake it was. And then, and he explained, now how big it is. And how big is the lake. He was showing, it was just the size of it. Like a pirogue size, that's all.

Pep: They call that a *trenasse*.

Bertha: Little canal, to pull that pirogue in. I don't know which program I was playing. "Oh, I heard of that. Oh, let me see." And that's what he was explainin', that man. How it had started. People was going fishing up there, they didn't have no boat to rent out and fish like they have now. People would go in those pirogues and hit the lake, well, they had a lot of water, and fish there. If you would catch... they didn't have no limits in those days, but you would come back with a tub full, a pirogue full. You wouldn't sell it. You would make sure that all your neighbors has some. You would share, you would share. And like my daddy was a trawler. Any poor people that would come in at the factory where he worked and he who need help, he would give them a dish of shrimp and a dish of fish or crab to make them a gumbo. He would say, "Here." They wouldn't sell it. But now you can't get nothing.

Pep: Nowadays, you gotta pay for it if you want it.

Bertha: Like I said, we was raised good, with lots of food. 'Cause my daddy was a fisherman. And then he would bring his fish and his shrimp to New Orleans. And he would go to the French Market. At the French Market, the one that would have vegetable that didn't sell it and if he had some shrimps and all that he didn't sell that weekend, they would trade. He would trade the shrimp for vegetable. So we always had fresh vegetables. But we was the lucky family.

## 9. AFTERWORD

Near the end of a rather long session at the dining room table in the house close by the Intracoastal in Larose, the late Pershing Lefort worried that he hadn't recounted much of the history of the oil field in south Louisiana. He mused: "I mean I've had a lifetime exposure to it, you know, and I can't relive the whole story." Ophelia Lefort had carried much of the conversation along by probing Pershing's recollections, asking for some more details, calibrating some of his dates by reference to events in their lives together. Contradicting her husband's frustration in not being able to revisit an entire life for a tape recorder, she said, "You pretty much did."

Ophelia well knew that such brief sessions cannot do justice to an individual's working life, whether that unfolded in the oil field or the household. Nor can oral histories of men and women fully tell the complex histories of communities and regions. Nonetheless, oral testimonies do afford individuals the chance to recall and record what they thought was important, interesting, amusing perhaps, or, more often than not, simply mundane. In fact, many of the individuals we approached in this research expressed surprise that anyone might be interested in their stories. Growing up in south Louisiana or coming in as a *Texien*: the oil and gas industry was simply a way of life to many of them. Some people, and some subjects, required more probing and intervention from the interviewer than others. Industrial accidents, for example, were not uncommon, but few of the folks we interviewed provided unsolicited narratives of such. Storms and hurricanes were similarly unremarkable, unless we persisted.

The few individuals represented in this volume, and the truncated versions of their own narratives, were selected not because they were extraordinary individuals or thrilling episodes. Nor can it be claimed that these were typical individuals and typical stories. Rather, they were selected and edited (minimally: no thoughts were added, no language altered substantially) because I thought (and still do, but I may yet be corrected and chastised) that they would strike a familiar chord with other residents of south Lafourche. I'd be gratified if someone read one of these narratives and said, to the effect, "Yeah, that guy down the bayou knows what he's lying about."

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## The Department of the Interior Mission

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering sound use of our land and water resources; protecting our fish, wildlife, and biological diversity; preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places; and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of all our people by encouraging stewardship and citizen participation in their care. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.



## The Minerals Management Service Mission

As a bureau of the Department of the Interior, the Minerals Management Service's (MMS) primary responsibilities are to manage the mineral resources located on the Nation's Outer Continental Shelf (OCS), collect revenue from the Federal OCS and onshore Federal and Indian lands, and distribute those revenues.

Moreover, in working to meet its responsibilities, the **Offshore Minerals Management Program** administers the OCS competitive leasing program and oversees the safe and environmentally sound exploration and production of our Nation's offshore natural gas, oil and other mineral resources. The MMS **Minerals Revenue Management** meets its responsibilities by ensuring the efficient, timely and accurate collection and disbursement of revenue from mineral leasing and production due to Indian tribes and allottees, States and the U.S. Treasury.

The MMS strives to fulfill its responsibilities through the general guiding principles of: (1) being responsive to the public's concerns and interests by maintaining a dialogue with all potentially affected parties and (2) carrying out its programs with an emphasis on working to enhance the quality of life for all Americans by lending MMS assistance and expertise to economic development and environmental protection.